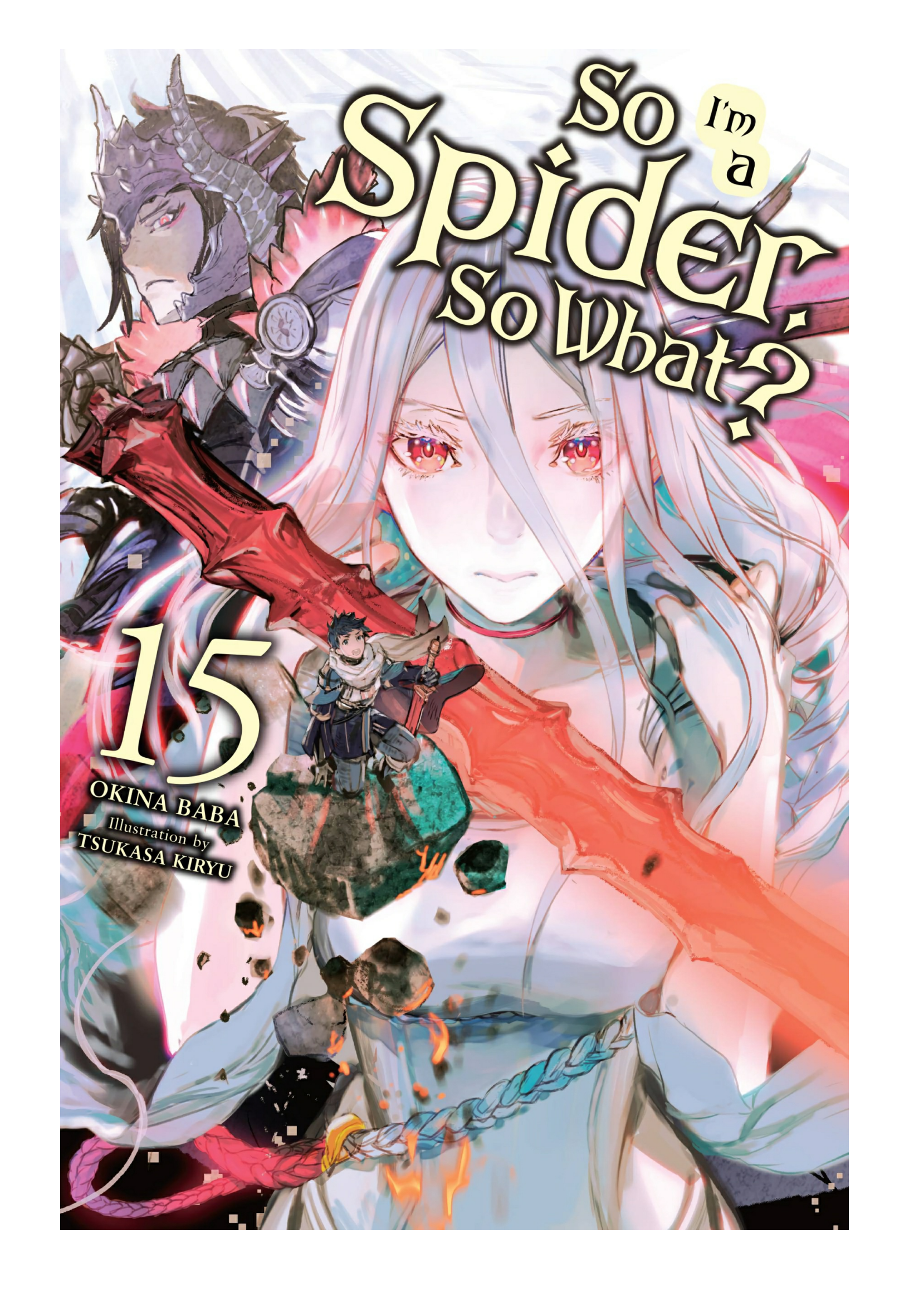




So I'm a Spider, So What?

15

OKINA BABA

Illustration by
TSUKASA KIRYU





<World Quest Activated>

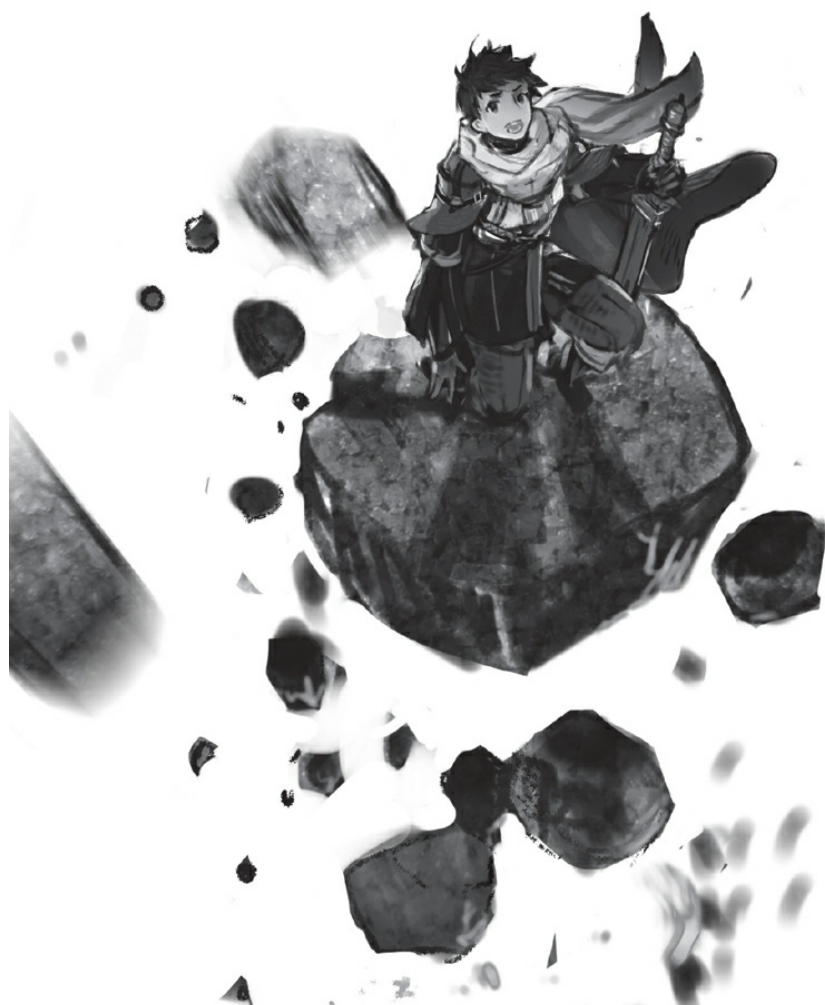
A voice from on high suddenly addresses everyone. The words they hear will force them to make the ultimate decision...!



so ^{I'm} a Spider, so What?

15

OKINA BABA
Illustration by
TSUKASA KIRYU




New York

Copyright

So I'm a Spider, So What?, Vol. 15

Okina Baba

Translation by Jenny McKeon

Cover art by Tsukasa Kiryu

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Merazophis

FOURTH ARMY COMMANDER

He served the Keren family as a butler until their land was attacked, and Sophia turned him into a vampire. Now that the lord and lady he served are gone, he has devoted all his efforts to protecting Sophia.



Güliedistodiez

NINTH ARMY COMMANDER

A god and administrator of the world and its system. Dragons and wyrms serve him as part of his dominion.



Phelmina

TENTH ARMY OFFICER

She was once a student at the academy Sophia attends, but due to various circumstances, she had her fiancé stolen, was chased out of school, and even got cut off by her family. Left without a family name, Phelmina was taken in by White and trained as a skilled secret agent.

Puppet Taratect Sisters

Their human girl-like appearances are puppets, with their real bodies being small spider monsters that control the puppet from within. They originally served Ariel, but now they've become attached to White.



Ael

Levelheaded but also rather shrewd, she is the de facto eldest sister.



Sael

Can't do anything except what she's ordered to do.



Riel

A mysterious being who's often staring into space or exhibiting other bizarre behavior.



Fiel

A friendly, mischievous, and energetic girl



Ariel

DEMON LORD

She was born during Potimas's immortality experiments as a human-spider chimera. After she was rescued from Potimas's lab, she was raised in the goddess Sariel's orphanage, but the effects of her own poison on her body made her very frail. Eventually, she was appointed as the current demon lord and began preparing to take down Potimas, only to find her hands full dealing with the sudden appearance of a mysterious spider monster in the Great Elroe Labyrinth, with whom she ultimately decided to form an alliance.



White

TENTH ARMY COMMANDER

Also known as Shiraori, the White Weaver. A reincarnation with memories of being a high school student in Japan, she retains the memories of Hiroyo Wakaba. She was reborn as a weak monster in the Great Elroe Labyrinth, and survived all kinds of harrowing ordeals; eventually, this led to her being feared by humans as the "Nightmare of the Labyrinth," and she was the very same spider monster who caused trouble for Demon Lord Ariel. She achieved deification by absorbing the energy of a bomb said to be capable of destroying a continent.



Sophia Keren

VAMPIRE

The only child of Lord Keren of Sariella. In her previous life as Shouko Negishi, she was so dark and spooky that her classmates called her "Rihoko" ("real horror girl"). In this life, she was reborn as a progenitor vampire, though vampires previously no longer existed in this world.



Wrath

EIGHTH ARMY COMMANDER

In his previous life, he was known as Kyoya Sasajima. Reborn as a goblin, he lived a happy life at first but lost his village and family to an attack by the imperial army. Later, he lost his sense of self and was on a wild rampage until Ariel and White saved him, and he ended up joining the demon army. He and Schlain the Hero were close friends in their previous life, but now their positions put them in direct opposition.

HUMANS

CHARACTER INTRODUCTION

REINCARNATIONS



Yuri

SAINT-TO-BE

A candidate for sainthood from the Holy Kingdom of Alleius. In her previous life, she was known as Yui Hasebe. She's become a fervent believer in the Word of God religion. Her fondness for Shun is a holdover from her previous life.



Hugo

Before being reincarnated as the prince of the Renxandt Empire, his name was Kengo Natsume. The internal strife in the empire affected him and twisted his personality, giving him an inflated ego. Under White's control, he spearheaded the coup in the Analeit Kingdom and the invasion on the elf village.



Kunihiro/Asaka

In their previous lives, their names were Kunihiro Tagawa and Asaka Kushitani. They were childhood friends in both lives. In this world, they were born and raised in the human-demon borderlands, but the demon Merazophis suddenly appeared one day and wiped out their clan. Having lost everything, they took on their old names and became adventurers, becoming relatively famous for their exploits.

Sachi Kudo

The former class rep, she is now the mediator of the reincarnations in the elf village. She was sold to the elves by her parents when she was young. In her former life, she got along well with their teacher, Ms. Oka, but their closely monitored life in the village has led her to harbor mistrust and animosity toward her former teacher.

Shinobu Kusama

A secret agent for the Word of God religion. He has always strongly believed in the "if you can't beat them, join them" philosophy, and was often used as a gofer in his previous life. In the battle of the elf village, his role was to destroy the teleport gates with exploding swords.



Shun

HERO

A reincarnation who was reborn as the fourth prince of the Analeit Kingdom. In his previous life, as Shunsuke Yamada, he was a thoroughly average boy, but in this life he is not only a prince but a hero, having unfortunately inherited the title. He is always pursuing the ideal of his beloved older brother Julius, the previous hero.



Katia

Once a high school boy named Kanata Ooshima, but was reincarnated as the daughter of a duke. She was brainwashed by Hugo until the condition was broken by the loss of her life, at which moment Shun saved her. After that incident, she has resolved to live as a woman in both body and mind, and now she holds the position of Shun's closest female companion.



Fei

In her previous life, she was known as Mirei Shinohara, but was reborn as a dragon. Once she formed a contract with Shun, she evolved from an earth wyrm into a light wyrm. She now has the ability to take human form and often does so, but she still retains the power of a light wyrm. In terms of pure stats, she might actually be stronger than Shun.



Filimøs

As Ms. Kanami Okazaki, she was teacher to Shun and the others. Reborn as an elf, she has worked tirelessly since infancy to protect her students with all her might. Since she was born and raised in the elf village, where Potimas's rule is absolute, she is convinced that "administrators are the enemy."



Ronandt Orozoi

HEAD MAGE OF THE IMPERIAL ARMY

An eccentric old man who was so enthralled with the magic he witnessed from the “Nightmare of the Labyrinth” that he entered the Great Elroe Labyrinth alone to train under the creature. However, he is without a doubt humanity’s strongest mage. He is one of the few fearless warriors who fought against Potimas’s mechanical weapons in the battle of the elf village and lived. In that battle, he teamed up with the Puppet Taratect Sisters and befriended them.



Hyrince Quarto

Second son of Duke Quarto of the Analeit Kingdom. He was a childhood friend of Julius and a member of his hero party. After Julius fell in battle, he joined Shun’s party and led them to the elf village as an elder brother figure. His true identity: a double of Güliedistodiez.



Sue

The second princess of Analeit Kingdom, and Shun’s half-sister. She is obsessed with her brother to the point of directing an actual death glare at anyone who gets close to him. She agrees to cooperate with White to guarantee Shun’s safety.

PREVIOUSLY...

story

In order to achieve his personal goal of immortality, Potimas consumed massive amounts of MA energy and nearly destroyed the world. The demon lord Ariel led her army to defeat the evil Potimas and his elf subordinates, disguising themselves as part of the imperial army to invade the elf village. Potimas, prepared for the invasion, brought out his secret weapons on the battlefield. The imperial army soldiers fell to the elf alliance easily. However, White’s counterattacks destroyed these weapons, and when Potimas himself tried to escape to another planet alone, he finally met his death at the hands of Ariel.



Potimas

The leader of the elf village. He has been alive since before the creation of the existence, and is in fact the main cause of the events that brought the world to the brink of destruction. He worked behind the scenes all over the world for the sole purpose of achieving immortality...only to be forced off the stage by the appearance of the irregular known as White.

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Dustin LXI

WORD OF GOD PONTIFF

Holder of a skill that reincarnates him with his memories intact each time he dies. He retains his memories from before the creation of the system to the present day, and devotes his many lives to protecting humanity and saving the world.

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Sariel

A lost angel. The Word of God religion considers her voice the Word of God, while the goddess religion worships her as a goddess. She offered herself up as the core pillar of the system in order to save humanity from destruction, and keeps the system running even as it whittles away at her.

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Administrator D

EVIL GOD

A particularly powerful god of the highest tier. All she cares about is being entertained. As an evil trickster, she'll meddle in the story as much as she can, but otherwise watches from the sidelines.

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A NEW DAWN

Good morning.

Yes, it's a new dawn.

Though unfortunately, I wouldn't exactly describe it as refreshing.

I spent the night in one of the intact homes in the elf village.

It's the kind of elf house you'd see in a story, carved into a giant tree trunk.

Can you call that a tree house? Yeah, sure, why not? Probably.

Very fancy and fantastical and all that.

Big fairy-tale vibes, too.

I normally spend my nights sleeping in my own home, but I can't resist trying it out for a night if you show me something like this.

But I can't say it was a very comfortable night's sleep.

After all, this is a postwar zone.

Thanks to Potimas's stupid secret weapons, like the sea urchins and that pyramid thing, the formerly lush forest has been reduced to a wasteland.

Frankly, there's a serious burnt smell.

This is pretty far away from the site of that battle, but you can still smell it from way over here.

Not to mention that there were battles with robots and mega-robots in this area, too, leaving plenty of scrap metal lying around.

Those robots clearly didn't run on gasoline or other liquid fuel, so it's not like that's leaking out and stinking up the place, but the faint smell of metal and burnt parts is...less than pleasant.

Even if it's not as bad as the stench from the burnt wasteland.

Man, I'd hate to have the Olfactory Enhancement skill at a time like this.

My sense of smell went back to normal when I became a god. Otherwise, I bet I wouldn't have been able to sleep, no matter how much I wanted to, with that smell keeping me up.

Well, unless I just turned the skill off, I guess.

But there's also the fact that it was elves who lived here.

That in and of itself is enough to make me a little nauseated.

Not to mention that *we're* the ones who killed those residents.

It's not like I'm afraid of ghosts or curses or whatever, but I can't say it doesn't make me feel a teeny bit uncomfortable.

And of course, I suppose I have to mention the stink of blood and guts and all that...

Overall, I would say it was just a really poorly timed stay in this particular home.

Maybe if I were visiting or on a trip or something I might have felt differently... Not in this situation, though.

I didn't sleep well, and I think I had nightmares, too.

Since I just finally wrapped up a big job, you'd think I at least deserved a good night's sleep.

Then again, I guess it's to be expected, given that the "big job" in question was an elf genocide.

Yep, it was an all-out attack on the elf village.

Of course, the main goal was to take out Potimas.

It's almost entirely his fault that this planet is in such a horrible state, you know.

Destroying the cause would hopefully rectify the problem at least a little.

That was the idea, anyway.

Although there's also the fact that Potimas and the Demon Lord had some serious bad blood.

To be totally honest, I have mixed feelings about letting the Demon Lord finish Potimas off herself.

By battling Potimas, the Demon Lord was able to finally destroy him like she always wanted.

But it came at a serious cost.

The backlash from that battle has rendered the Demon Lord almost entirely unable to fight.

And that's not all.

In fact, this part is way more important: The Demon Lord's life span has been shortened to almost nothing.

Now, she already knew she wouldn't live much longer, which is why she took on the role of Demon Lord in the first place.

Physically, her body doesn't age, but her soul was already reaching its limits.

That was reflected in the Demon Lord's stats.

All her stats and skills had long since stopped changing.

The stats and skills governed by the system are strengthened by absorbing a portion of the soul of a defeated opponent in the form of "experience points," attaching that piece to one's own soul.

Basically, the process forcibly expands your soul.

And the Demon Lord's soul has already been blown up to the point of bursting like an overfilled balloon.

So it can no longer absorb the soul pieces called experience points, which is why her stats and skills can't get any stronger.

And so the Demon Lord's soul was unable to take on even more experience points.

Either her soul would explode, or its contents would start leaking out like a balloon with a hole poked into it.

Either way, the Demon Lord's soul had reached its limits.

So she knew that she was going to die in the near future.

Except that's by the standards of the Demon Lord, who's lived a stupidly long time.

From a normal human's point of view, I'm sure she still had plenty of time left.

But that was all used up in the battle against Potimas.

Now the Demon Lord looks like she could die at any moment.

Seeing her like this, I can't help but wonder if letting her fight Potimas was really the right move.

Even if it was her wish, maybe I should've dug in my heels and refused.

But at the same time, part of me also recognizes that because the Demon Lord fought Potimas, I didn't have to waste any precious energy.

It's an invaluable victory that the Demon Lord won nearly at the cost of her life, yet here I am looking at it in terms of numbers.

Even I have to admit that's a pretty gross personality trait.

Man, I suck sometimes.

Ugh... I've gotta stop dwelling on this, though.

What's done is done, and I can't change it.

I'll reflect on what I've done, but I won't sit around and regret it.

Because regret just means you're rejecting the person you were up until that point.

No matter what happens, you've gotta accept it and use it as fuel to keep moving forward.

All righty, then.

I guess that means my first order of business is checking on our prisoners of war.

In this battle, we captured Yamada and the rest of his hero party.

The reincarnations who were being held in the elf village under the guise of

protection.

And Ms. Oka, the last surviving elf.

That's it.

In other words, it's almost all reincarnations.

Y'know, since we killed all the other elves.

The entire race of elves was really just based on a bunch of Potimas clones anyway.

What this world knows as elves were all either Potimas's clones, people who got remodeled into elves, or their children.

From what I've heard, the elves were abducting people even before they started kidnapping reincarnations specifically.

They'd turn the abductees into elves and have them make children with Potimas's clones.

Otherwise, if it was just Potimas clones reproducing, there'd be some genetic side effects.

The children created in that way were raised as elves.

By nature, that means the majority of elves were blood relatives of Potimas.

Is that even a race, or just a bloodline?

Well, at any rate, what I'm saying is that exterminating all the elves was better for everyone in the long run.

The only exceptions are Ms. Oka and the half-elves.

Ms. Oka aside, it would've been a huge pain to take out all the half-elves, too.

Even I'm not all-seeing, you know.

There are places I can't reach, and more that I've overlooked, I'm sure.

I do think it's for the best to wipe out the elves as thoroughly as possible, but eliminating every last one outside the elf village here would be way too much trouble.

I was bound to miss a few here and there.

So basically, I'm ignoring anyone who cut ties with the elves and went off on their own.

Which includes the half elf in our pal Yamada's party, too.

Apparently, she already died once, but that doesn't count.

She came back to life, okay? All's well that ends well.

Yamada might have gotten knocked out hard in the process, but that's not my problem!

Don't look at me!

Seriously, it's got nothing to do with me!

So yeah.

I'm a little nervous, but I guess I have to check on how Yamada made out, huh?

It's probably my fault that he passed out in the first place...

I bet it was you-know-what, right?

His Taboo skill finally maxed out?

What am I gonna do if that totally altered his personality or something...?

Aaah, I'm so nervous.

I guess I've gotta explain things to the other reincarnations, too, huh...?

Are we sure I can't just get Mr. Oni to handle it?

Speaking isn't exactly my strong suit.

In a way, this next quest is even harder than conquering the elf village.

I guess I should go scope things out.

The first thing I see when I leave the tree house is a mountain of corpses.

No, really. I'm being totally literal here.

The bodies that make up this actual mountain are what's left of the imperial army that invaded the elf village.

With Natsume leading the charge, they fought the elves, and then got

pincered in a surprise attack from the demon army behind them, leading to their utter downfall.

While of course there are some survivors left, from a military standpoint they've taken enough damage to call it more than a decimation.

It's considered decimation if they lost at least 10 percent of their forces, right?

Or was it twenty?

Well, either way, this is definitely more than that.

The troop Natsume was leading directly faced off against relatively average foes like Yamada's party and Ms. Oka; their losses were relatively few.

But the other troops all got stuck fighting Potimas's secret weapons, to the point where some of them were completely obliterated.

And by secret weapons, I don't mean the ones I fought, like the sea urchins, or the Gloria Omega the Demon Lord fought.

I mean the ones I've been calling robots.

No, not even mega-robots. Just the regular mass-produced cannon fodder.

But while they might seem like hunks of junk from my perspective, they're a horrifying threat by the standards of most people in this world.

How big of a threat? you ask. Believe it or not, those robots were probably on par with Earth Dragon Araba, if not stronger.

We're talking weapons that no number of ordinary humans could stand a chance against, and they're mass-produced, popping up in droves from all over the place.

Yeah. I can see why most of these guys kicked the bucket.

And there you have it: a mountain of corpses.

I guess the surviving imperial soldiers and Mera's men stayed up all night recovering them from the battlefield.

You mean while I was complaining about getting a bad night's sleep, these guys were working overnight right after fighting a hard battle all day?

Okay, that's my bad.

Sorry for complaining about champagne problems, guys.

I guess I was lucky that I got to sleep at all.

Turns out soldiers in this parallel fantasy world fight until they die, and if they don't die, they get put to work all night. Worst working conditions ever.

Hey, all you *isekai* fans! Want to try getting reincarnated as a soldier in another world?

...Yeah, now I'm starting to feel really bad for them.

Although this was all part of the plan in the first place, since I always intended to use the imperial army as expendable pawns.

I even had Natsume gather soldiers from corrupt imperial noble families and such, specifically so it wouldn't be a big deal if they died... But it's their bosses who were at fault, not the soldiers.

I'm sure some of them were benefiting from those dirty dealings, but still.

Well, either way, they all played their parts perfectly well.

So I think they at least deserve to be properly mourned.

Obviously, they can't carry all these corpses back to the empire, so they'll either have to make do with mementos or cremate the bodies and bring back the ashes.

Either way, we'll have to bury them with care and respect.

On the other hand, the elves' corpses are nowhere in sight.

They've all vanished into my stomach.

Or the stomachs of my little clones, to be more precise.

Look, this is my way of showing respect to the dead, too, okay?

In the natural world, it's only right to eat anything you've killed.

By eating their bodies, they become part of my flesh and blood.

Ah, the circle of life.

I'm sure Potimas would be thrilled to bits that his descendants became the flesh and blood of a god, too, no doubt.

"Good morning, Lady White."

As I look out at the mountain of corpses, Mera approaches me politely.

"Have you eaten breakfast yet? I would be happy to prepare something for you."

Okay, so he's casually offering me breakfast.

I dunno about that one, chief.

Normally there'd be nothing strange about such an offer from an attentive guy like Mera, but right now, he's here as an army commander.

Since we're technically the same rank, it's gotta look weird to his subordinates for him to make such a considerate offer to me.

And Mera's usually good at keeping his personal life and his official duties separate.

He'd never make it so obvious to his men that he considers himself below me.

Okay, I really hope I'm wrong about this, but uh...

...Mera, you wouldn't happen to be worried that I might try to eat these corpses, would you?

If my eyes were open, I'm sure they'd be very narrowed right now.

Mera seems to pick up on this. His gaze wavers a little.

It's such a slight shift that no ordinary person would notice, but nothing gets past me.

How insulting.

But fine.

I really haven't eaten breakfast yet. I guess I'll take Mera up on his offer.

It's the least he can do to make up for suspecting me like that.

Wait, what's this?

I'm sensing a serious death glare, and even some magic, to boot.

Mera senses it a moment after I do and starts to move, but I raise a hand to stop him.

"Hrmph, just as I suspected. This much isn't even a threat to you, eh?"

The person who was radiating a threatening aura calmly walks toward me.

It's one of the imperial army generals. I think his name is Ronandt.

Most people might know him as Julius the Hero's magic teacher.

"What do you think you're doing?"

Mera sends a death glare right back at Ronandt.

Thanks to skills like Intimidation, the power behind Mera's threatening aura is off the charts.

Some of the demon and imperial soldiers working nearby turn pale or even faint.

Yet in the face of all that pressure, Ronandt maintains a cool smile.

Huh. Guess he's lived longer than most other humans for a reason.

Mera's stats far outmatch his on paper, but in terms of sheer presence, Ronandt somehow seems like a bigger deal.

"Why, I was only offering a greeting, my boy."

"Aha. So they shoot magic at each other as a greeting in the empire, do they? I've never heard of such a custom."

Mera only ramps up the intimidation factor in response to Ronandt's aloof attitude.

You could practically cut the tension in the air with a knife.

Except there is one little thing that's already cutting the tension quite a bit...

Um, am I allowed to ask about this?

Fiel, why are you hanging off Ronandt?

Since there's a little girl clinging to his back, Mera just looks like some jerk

glaring at an old man and his granddaughter.

What's going on here?

I don't get it.

Even Mera seems perplexed beneath his air of intimidation.

I mean, can ya blame him?

"What a petty fellow, to get so worked up over such a trifling matter. Indeed, this esteemed personage here has remained calm, eh? She clearly knew that I did not truly intend to use that magic."

Yeah, sure, except the main reason I'm not moving is that I'm totally thrown off by the fact that Fiel is hanging off your back.

A smirking old geezer with a little girl on his back...

Seriously, what's up with this guy?

"You see, I happen to have some shared history with your esteemed friend. Of course, my existence is surely of little consequence to her, but that is why I thought to introduce myself now, that she might learn my name."

Um, okay. I already know your name.

Besides, you keep showing up in such memorable ways, I'm pretty sure I couldn't forget you even if I tried.

"My name is Ronandt Orozoi. Head mage of the imperial court of the Renxandt Empire."

He gives such a dramatic introduction that I can almost hear a *DUN-DUN-DUUUN!*

And then, Fiel pulls on his cheeks.

Now there's an old man standing in front of me making a frog face.

"PFFT?!"

Mera lets out a snort.

I barely manage to hold back a spit take myself.

How's anyone supposed to keep it together when you make a weird face at a

time like that?!

Any professional comedian would kill for that level of humor!

I've got no choice but to laugh at this!

Shoot. I gotta get out of here or I'm gonna burst out laughing.

"Let's go."

"Erm, are you quite certain?"

I nod firmly at the utterly baffled Mera.

Quick, retreat while my abs and face muscles are still doing their job!

I turn my back on the old man, who's still frozen with a frog face, and swiftly walk away.

"What have you done, you little rascal?!"

I pretend not to hear the person shouting behind me.

Mera keeps glancing over his shoulder at the geezer, but I keep striding away without hesitation, forcing him to follow after me.

It almost sounded like someone cried out, "P-please, come back!" behind me, but I'm sure it's not directed at me.

Must be part of their new comedy act or something.

So obviously I shouldn't go back there.

Oof, I haven't even met with the reincarnations yet and I'm already exhausted all of a sudden.

No waaay.

While that run-in with a weird old man took the wind out of my sails, I still let Mera lead the way for the sake of breakfast, and we arrive at a tree house similar to the one I slept in.

The demon army does have tents and such for camping, but obviously a building with a proper roof is the more comfortable choice.

Even if some of the areas got razed to the ground, the excessively large elf village still has plenty of space for us to use.

There's no reason not to take advantage, especially since it's not like anyone else is using them anymore.

"Oh? Good morning."

In the tree house, Vampy is elegantly eating breakfast.

The wooden plates, presumably belonging to the prior owners of the house, are loaded with all kinds of food.

The portion sizes are nothing crazy, since it's just breakfast, but there's certainly a wide variety of options to make your mouth water.

Bread, salad, fruit, steaks cut into bite-size pieces, scrambled eggs...

It's a much more luxurious breakfast than you'd expect the day after a battle, and there's Vampy, digging in daintily with a knife and fork.

What are you, nobility?!

Ah, I guess she really was born into a noble family.

"Please prepare portions for two more people," Mera instructs his subordinate in the back.

Looks like they're using this place as a special dining hall for officers and such.

The subordinate immediately withdraws farther into the back to carry out his orders.

There must be a kitchen back there, I guess.

And wait, two more people? Is Mera gonna eat with us, then?

It feels like it's been ages since I saw Vampy and Mera sit down for a meal together.

Mera is technically Vampy's servant, after all.

It must feel kinda weird for him to eat with his master.

Although it's a little late for that now, since they always ate together during our journey from Sariella to the demon territory.

Plus, Mera's official position as a commander technically outranks Vampy's...

Hmm?

When you put it that way, isn't Vampy the one out of place eating here?

Mera and I are both commanders, but Vampy doesn't even have a rank, does she?

What do the demon army soldiers who don't know anything about the situation make of this, I wonder?

Hmm...? Well, she does get officer treatment here. Maybe they've got some idea what's going on?

As I reflect on these pointless matters, Mera pulls out a chair for me.

Huh?! I'm seated all of a sudden!

What a gentleman!

Is this the power of chivalry?!

By the time I'm done marveling, Mera is already seated.

On closer inspection, Mera's face looks pale with fatigue.

I can't blame him—he fought the elves all day, then cleaned up after the battle all night.

Doesn't seem like he's been eating much, either.

Otherwise, I doubt he would sit down to eat with me and Vampy.

He'd probably eat by himself to be polite.

I imagine there's no one else here besides Vampy, because they're all working or sleeping off their exhaustion, too.

It feels really weird to see two vampires eating breakfast at the break of dawn, though.

"Ms. Ariel is sleeping. Kyouya is guarding her. I've no idea where Phelmina is."

Evidently guessing my thoughts, Vampy tells me what the rest of the usual gang is doing.

No idea about Phelmina, though, huh?

Knowing her, I'm sure she's working her butt off, but that poor girl doesn't leave much of an impression.

In fact, Phelmina is *my* subordinate. If anyone should know what she's doing, it should be me, right?

...It's fine! Nothing to worry about!

Yeah, for sure. Probably.

"Oh, and Kusama went to see the other reincarnations. I imagine they're eating breakfast together by now, perhaps?"

Kusama, Kusama... Oh, right.

The kid who was raised by the church and sucks at being a ninja.

Turns out Kusama's father is one of the pontiff's secret intelligence agents, which is how the pontiff found out about reincarnations in the first place.

He also recruited Kusama himself as an agent and trained him.

We were introduced to him when we formed a temporary alliance with the pontiff against the elves.

He was relatively friendly with Mr. Oni in their previous lives, I think. They were chatting during the breaks between our meeting with the pontiff.

Not that I got involved much. People like Vampy and me can't quite keep up with Kusama's high energy.

Even back in his old life, Kusama was always kind of a class clown, life-of-the-party guy.

Shadowy types like me and Vampy can't hang out with sunny types like him...

Why did someone loud and flashy like Kusama get a unique skill like Ninja? Probably because his name is "Shinobu" or some stupid reason like that.

Knowing D, it wouldn't surprise me.

Funny, though...

As far as Kusama's concerned, this is a big reunion with his long-lost classmates.

Kinda like an alumni meet-up?

I've got my own reasons for not being super excited to go reignite old

friendships. I wonder what Vampy and Mr. Oni think about that, though?

“What?”

Vampy sounds grouchy, although there’s no way she knows what I was thinking.

Oh, right.

Come to think of it, she doesn’t have very good memories of her previous life, does she?

I guess that much is obvious from the fact that she’s eating here instead.

I’m still probably gonna make her come with me to explain things to the other reincarnations later, though.

Same for Mr. Oni.

Oh, speaking of which... I wonder what’s going on with Yamada.

Maybe he’s opened his eyes by now?

I wonder if Vampy knows anything?

“Yamada...”

“Excuse me? ...Ah, I see. I imagine he’s still sleeping. At the very least, I haven’t heard anything about him waking up yet.”

After all these years, Vampy has gotten pretty good at guessing what I’m thinking, but she still gets stumped at times.

Like just now. She obviously didn’t understand what I was asking at first.

Her reading between the lines still has a ways to go.

Try learning from Mr. Oni’s example.

“If anything, I’d be a bit more worried about Hasebe, now that she’s recovered from the brainwashing. She seemed awfully disoriented, from what I’ve heard.”

Ah.

That’s a good point, actually.

Of the two reincarnations brainwashed by Natsume, Ooshima broke out of it without any help, but Hasebe was brainwashed this entire time.

What's gonna happen when she comes to her senses?

Uh-oh...

Maybe it would help if I erase some of her memories and stuff.

"I'm told she's being kept asleep right now. If you're concerned, maybe you should go check on her later?"

Yeah, good call.

But first, we feast!

I chow down on the food being served to us.

Hmmm.

It feels weird to be eating like this right after a battle.

Guess that's a perk of being a big shot.

I didn't work through the night, but I still got to eat tasty food in the morning... I guess you could say I've got it made.

Forget about Mera next to me, Phelmina still out there working somewhere, and Mr. Oni, who probably hasn't gotten a wink of shut-eye guarding the Demon Lord.

Keep up the good work, people.

While I'm on this excruciating tangent in my head, I finish eating breakfast.

Thanks for the meal.

Now that I'm done, I bid Mera farewell.

There's still lots of post-battle cleanup to do: burning or burying the dead imperial army soldiers, dealing with the prisoners of war, and so on.

I know he's been working all night already, but I'm gonna need him to keep at it.

As for Vampy and me, we're going to see the Demon Lord.

She's probably still sleeping, but we need to take Mr. Oni away from guarding her for now.

His communication skills are gonna be indispensable for our meeting with the other reincarnations.

Whether Mr. Oni is there or not has a huge impact on the likelihood of our success.

So here we are, in front of Mr. Oni.

I hadn't explained any of this ahead of time, but thanks to his impressive intuition, he figures out what I'm trying to say through hand gestures alone.

So we're able to bring Mr. Oni along with us.

Ael, Sael, and Riel are still guarding the Demon Lord. They'll be fine without him.

Which reminds me, what was Fiel doing hanging off that old geezer?

Why is she sticking to that guy instead of guarding the Demon Lord?

It makes no sense.

Anyway, I guess that means we're ready to head over to the reincarnations.

...Man, do I really *have* to, though?

I don't wanna...

These reincarnations all knew Hiiro Wakaba.

As if that wasn't already bad enough, I'm gonna have to actually *talk* to them to explain what's going on.

What did I do to deserve this punishment?

Ugh, I totally don't wanna go.

But I have no other choice...

Or do I?

When you reeeally think about it, I don't actually have any obligation to explain the situation to these other reincarnations, do I?

Couldn't I just let them run around in confusion without a word of explanation?

Maybe, maybe not...

Maybe so!

"Ms. White. You're wondering if you can get out of this, aren't you?"

Nngh!

Mr. Oni, are you a mind reader or something?!

Hrmmm...

UGH.

All right, fiiine.

Now that Mr. Oni caught me in the act, I guess I'd better buckle down and do it.

And so we arrive at the reincarnations' tree house.

I evacuated them into my separate dimension during the battle with the elves, but as soon as the fight was over, I shoved them into this tree house.

Aside from Natsume, they're all here, even Yamada and friends.

I feel bad for stuffing them all into such a small space, but it makes it easier for me to manage.

Besides, I at least tried to separate them by gender and such.

And I've got someone keeping watch on them.

Did I ask for their permission before employing a spy? *Of course* not!

I reach for the tree house door...but for some reason, even though it's perfectly ordinary, it seems incredibly heavy to me.

Once they see my face, they'll probably have a lot to say to me...

For one thing, I've got the face of Hiroyuki Wakaba.

Oh, and by the way, I didn't let them see my face when I popped them into an alternate dimension and back out again.

From their perspective, they were suddenly tossed into an empty space, then thrown back out. That's probably all they know.

So if I show up looking like Hiroyuki Wakaba, who presumably has some idea of what's going on, they're gonna start peppering me with questions! I can see it now!

Argh, I don't wanna deal with that.

But I guess I can't keep dragging it out like this, either.

Let's do this! Just gotta barge right in.

So I open the door and find Kusama and Ogiwara tied up with rope.

SLAM.

I automatically shut the door.

Hmm?

Hmmm?

Hmmmmm?!

What the hell was that? Am I seeing things?

Is there a mage so masterful that they can make someone like me see such realistic illusions?!

Trying to make sure I didn't make some kind of mistake, I slowly open the door again.

Sure enough, Kusama and Ogiwara are all tied up.

...Okay.

Um, sure.

Riiight. Got it.

For the sake of argument, I can see why they'd get tied up, I guess.

Kusama and Ogiwara were working for the Word of God.

Kusama was part of the attack on the elf village, meaning he was on our side, and Ogiwara is a spy who got caught by the elves on purpose to leak

information from the inside.

Yep, he's another reincarnation who fell under the pontiff's influence.

Ogiwara has a unique skill called Unlimited Telephone, which can actually communicate even through the barrier that was around the elf village.

It's way more impressive than it sounds.

That barrier was crazy powerful, given the stupid amounts of MA energy it used up.

The fact that this skill could ignore that barrier might not sound exciting, but it's still amazing.

It's just telepathy. But still: telepathy!

The inside information about the elf village we got from Ogiwara was seriously a huge help in putting together our plan of attack.

And I gotta hand it to him for getting captured by elves, imprisoned here in the village, and spending years in here for that sole purpose.

That's just how we see it from our side, though.

To the other reincarnations, he's basically a traitor. So I do kinda get why they would want to capture him and maybe interrogate him.

But, uh, why would you tie the pair of them up face-to-face like they're hugging each other?

Isn't back-to-back usually the standard in this kind of situation?

Why are they facing the wrong way?

Kusama and Ogiwara are both straining to turn their heads away, but c'mon, their faces are still touching.

If the angle was just a little different, they'd already be kissing.

And on top of that, why are the girls watching them and looking so pleased with themselves?

If there were cameras in this world, I bet they'd be having a whole photoshoot.

The only ones who seem sane here are Ms. Oka, the old class rep Kudo, and Kushitani.

No, wait.

Ms. Oka keeps saying things like “This is very unkind!” and she’s covering her face, but she’s still peeking at them through her fingers.

Kudo is practically bawling: “No, not like this. It’s only acceptable when it’s 2D. 3D is going too far!” Whatever that’s supposed to mean.

So the only sane one here is Kushitani!

Uhh, what in the...? What?

“Miss Wakaba! Please, help!”

As I’m staring dumbfounded at the whole bizarre scene, Kusama notices me and starts begging for help.

He sounds like he’s on the verge of tears.

Hey, don’t drag me into this!

At the sound of his voice, everyone else in the room turns to stare at me, too.

Stop it!

Why are you focusing on me at a weird time like this?!

Don’t look at me!

“No way.”

“Wakaba?”

“But I thought...”

“Is it really her?”

The reincarnations start whispering among themselves, still looking at me.

Finally, one of them steps forward as a representative.

It’s the former class rep, Kudo.

“It’s good to see you again... Erm, you *are* Miss Wakaba, aren’t you?”

That’s not actually true, but saying so now would only complicate matters, so

I just nod.

At that, Ms. Oka is visibly shaken.

“Incidentally, is the person behind you Sasajima, by chance?”

“Yep, that’s right. Good to see you, class rep.”

“You as well.”

The tension leaves Kudo’s shoulders when she hears Mr. Oni’s mild-mannered greeting, as if the fight has gone out of her.

But she immediately pulls herself back together and looks at my other companion.

“Then by process of elimination, you must be Miss Negishi?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

When Vampy nods, there’s more muttering from the reincarnations behind Kudo.

From what I can hear... Well, most of it sounds like they’re all surprised at Vampy’s new look.

Kudo silences the chattering reincarnations with a loud *clap* of her hands.

“Well?” she says, sounding openly wary. “What do you want with us, then?”

I can’t blame her for being suspicious.

The reincarnations who were being kept here in the elf village are aware that the imperial army attacked.

But they don’t know anything else about the situation, and then I put them into an isolated space and popped them back out into captivity here.

What’s going to happen to them now?

What in the world is going on?

They have no idea, and now three fellow reincarnations have suddenly appeared. It’s only fair that they’d be cautious of us.

Other than that, the others just seem confused.

Along with Kudo, Shinohara seems on guard, too, as well as Tagawa and Kushitani.

The rest seem more bewildered than anything.

“Please don’t worry. We don’t mean you any harm.” Mr. Oni speaks before I do. “Ms. Oka might not believe us, but we’re not your enemies. I hope you can trust me on that much, at least.”

The room falls silent at Mr. Oni’s earnest plea.

A few reincarnations cast their eyes toward Ms. Oka.

But she doesn’t seem to notice, just opening and closing her mouth in silent confusion.

I’m guessing she’s trying to talk but can’t figure out what to say.

“We came here today to talk things out. There’s a lot we need to discuss.”

Mr. Oni looks around at everyone as he speaks.

Nobody says a word to object.

Yeah, I knew it was a good call to bring him along.

“Umm...before that, though, could you maybe untie us?”

“Shut up! Read the room, stupid!”

When Kusama raises a pitiful request, Ogiwara snaps at him.

“...I get why Kusama’s tied up, but why’d you tie up Ogi, too?” Mr. Oni asks point-blank.

Come to think of it, that’s a good question. I know they see Kusama as an enemy because he faced off against Yamada’s party at one point, but how’d they find out that Ogiwara is a spy?

As long as he kept his mouth shut, I don’t see why they’d figure it out...

“This idiot sold me out as a spy the second he opened his damn mouth...”

“Ahh...”

The idiot in question, also known as Kusama, sticks his tongue out with a sheepish grin.

No doubt he ran right over to Ogiwara and yelled something like “Our plan worked, Ogi!” revealing to everyone else that Ogiwara was on the same side as Kusama...

Yeah, I can totally picture that.

“...Well, let’s not just stand around. Have a seat and we’ll talk.”

Once Kusama and company have taken the tension out of the room, Kudo offers this suggestion with a tired-sounding sigh.

Unfortunately for them, Kusama and Ogiwara get left right where they are.

This tree house is a four-story building.

I don’t know if you can actually use “four-story building” to describe a structure carved out of a giant tree, but let’s not worry about that right now.

So anyway, the first floor is a dining hall.

There are a few tables, along with chairs to match.

But right now, the tables have been moved to the sides of the room, leaving everyone to position their chairs wherever they like.

This was at Kudo’s suggestion, claiming that it would be harder to hear us out with tables in the way.

So the reincarnations are sitting in a half-circle with me at the center, waiting for the conversation to start.

Yeah, I’m in the center!

Why me?!

You should’ve put Mr. Oni there!

He’s the one who’s been speaking for us this whole time. Why wouldn’t you just go with the flow and leave it up to him?!

But Mr. Oni smoothly ceded center stage to yours truly and stepped back to sit at my side.

I can see it in his eyes.

He’s saying I’m the one who should do the talking.

Thanks, but no thanks.

You don't need to be weirdly considerate at a time like this!

Grrr... This is why Goody Two-shoes like him are the worst!

People who like to follow the rules refuse to be flexible in these situations.

I use my X-ray vision to peek at Mr. Oni without turning my head.

He's not moving a muscle.

Clearly, he has no intention of doing anything until I talk.

Dammit.

Searching for help, I look to my other side.

Vampy is sitting there, looking rather sulky.

Doesn't look like she'll be much help, either.

Yeah, I'm screwed.

If I get her to talk, I bet she'll make things even worse somehow.

I look straight ahead.

There, Kudo is sitting with her arms and even legs folded, looking straight at me.

She always had an intense stare in her old life, and those slitted eyes and pretty features have carried over into this one.

It's seriously intimidating to have a girl like that glaring at you.

Maybe she has the Intimidation skill?

And next to her is Ms. Oka, looking fidgety.

Her gaze is whipping all over the place, her body squirming in her seat.

This is different from the other reincarnations, who are nervous because they have no idea what's going on.

If anything, maybe Ms. Oka is even more worried about what's going to happen next because she *does* have some knowledge.

I guess, from the others' point of view, they really don't know what to expect,

huh?

Since we said we want to talk things out, I'm sure they gave in to the desire for an explanation.

But for Ms. Oka, the situation is a little different.

For one thing, she seems to know that Vampy and Mr. Oni were on the demon army side.

They were supposedly being attacked by the imperial army—and then two reincarnations from the demon army suddenly show up?

No wonder she's taken aback.

Plus, Ms. Oka's been fed a bunch of BS information from Potimas all her life. She has no way of knowing what's right and what's wrong.

So because of the knowledge she has, she's even more confused than the other reincarnations.

Of all the other reincarnations here, the others with the most knowledge next to Ms. Oka are Tagawa, Kushitani, and Shinohara.

Tagawa and Kushitani only arrived at the elf village recently; before that, they were adventuring all over the world.

Not long ago, they participated in the human-demon war and went up against Mera.

In that way, they might have even more of a history with the demon army than Ms. Oka.

But the two of them seem calmer than Ms. Oka, ready to hear us out.

Shinohara, meanwhile, is leaning against the wall and staring at me rather than sitting down.

...Um, that's a little scary.

Her gaze is even more intense than Kudo's.

But it doesn't seem like she's going to start yelling at me.

The only other reincarnations who actually fought in the elf village attack

aren't here.

They're all recuperating from injuries or exhaustion.

Honestly, it's probably better that way for now. They'd only make things even messier if they were here.

Aside from the tied-up Kusama and Ogiwara, the other reincarnations each have various attitudes, but they're at least looking attentive.

Besides Ms. Oka, it seems like they're all willing to listen with an open mind.

This is the perfect chance to win over the rest of the reincarnations while Yamada and friends aren't around!

But I feel like I'm surrounded by enemies on all sides.

Diagonally behind me on one side is Mr. Oni, sitting still as a statue.

On the other side is Vampy, who seems to be sulking.

Right in front of me is Kudo, pressuring me with her eyes to hurry up and explain.

Ms. Oka keeps glancing at me nervously, too.

And the rest of the reincarnations are all totally staring.

Can I run away, please? No?

Do I really have to explain things with everyone's attention laser-focused on me?

I do, huh? Riiight, of course.

Umm, umm...

Let's see. Should I start by talking about the weather?

Nice and sunny today, isn't it?

Yeah, that's not right.

But seriously, what should I tell them first?

These reincarnations have nooo idea what's going on. I've gotta explain the whole thing from square one.

But where *is* square one, exactly?

Maybe I should start with the creation of this world, or rather the system?

Hmm...but that would probably just be confusing for them, since it's probably not what they're wondering about at the moment, huh?

What do the reincarnations want to know most of all right now?

When I look at it that way, maybe I should start like this?

"First of all, you're all currently prisoners of the demons."

"What?"

Kudo stares at me in shock for a moment, then her expression hardens.

The other reincarnations start muttering, too, and chaos ensues.

Okay, looks like that wasn't the right call.

Since they've got people like Kusama, I assumed they at least knew a little bit of information, but apparently they hadn't been told anything like this.

They didn't even hear anything from the ones who actually fought us, like Tagawa?

...Ahh, they probably tied up Kusama and Ogiwara to try to get that information out of them.

Maybe I should've come a little later.

"Quiet!"

Mr. Oni stands and claps his hands, silencing the crowd.

"Don't worry. Even if you're technically prisoners, that doesn't mean anything bad is going to happen to you. If anything, it's more like we're protecting you. So please don't be alarmed. Like I said before, we really don't mean you any harm. I hope you can at least hear us out to the end, even if some of it comes off as strange. Is that all right?"

Mr. Oni's sincerity calms down the alarmed reincarnations.

Shinohara, Tagawa, and Kushitani still seem on edge, but otherwise it looks like they're going to hear us out.

Phew. Nice one, Mr. Oni!

I guess even though they've been living in the elf village, they still see demons as the enemies of humans.

No wonder they got freaked out when I suddenly announced that they were the prisoners of said demons.

Welp, that's my bad.

Thank goodness Mr. Oni smoothed things over for me.

"So...what do you mean, exactly? The three of you are working with the demons?"

Kudo rubs her temples as she asks this.

Normally, I would just nod, but this time even I can tell that wouldn't be enough of an explanation to pacify anyone.

Come on, I've gotta say something!

Aah! Uhh! Umm!

...Hrmm. I didn't really want to do this, but you can't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs.

I guess I've gotta put my pride aside for now and do the thing.

So I flip the switch.

"Yes, that's correct. Incidentally, the three of us here are not human."

As I speak, I open my eyes.

I turned off all my Evil Eyes so there wouldn't be any negative effects from looking at me directly, but their unnatural appearance still makes the reincarnations gasp.

At the same time, Vampy and Mr. Oni also gasp at the sudden change in my attitude, but I'm just gonna ignore that.

"We three have been collaborating with the Demon Lord in order to achieve certain goals. Now, I'll explain that in detail later. First, we should discuss the current situation."

The words flow forth without any hesitation.

Part of me is surprised, even though it's coming out of my own mouth.

See, I have memories that aren't actually mine.

They're the memories of Hiiro Wakaba, D's temporary human form.

I can use those memories to recreate Hiiro Wakaba's personality.

It's what I call Hiiro Wakaba Mode.

When I'm in this mode, I can say what I'm thinking without any issues.

Hiiro Wakaba wasn't a lousy speaker like me, after all. It would be strange if she couldn't talk.

But this mode basically means I'm doing an imitation of D.

Me! Pretending to be D!

Seriously, it's so humiliating!

That's why I don't like to do it!

But otherwise, I can't explain things properly!

So I'm just gonna have to suck it up.

"First of all, I imagine you've heard that the imperial army invaded the elf village. We in the demon army attacked the elf village from behind them. The army that Natsume was leading was only a decoy."

That makes the reincarnations stir again.

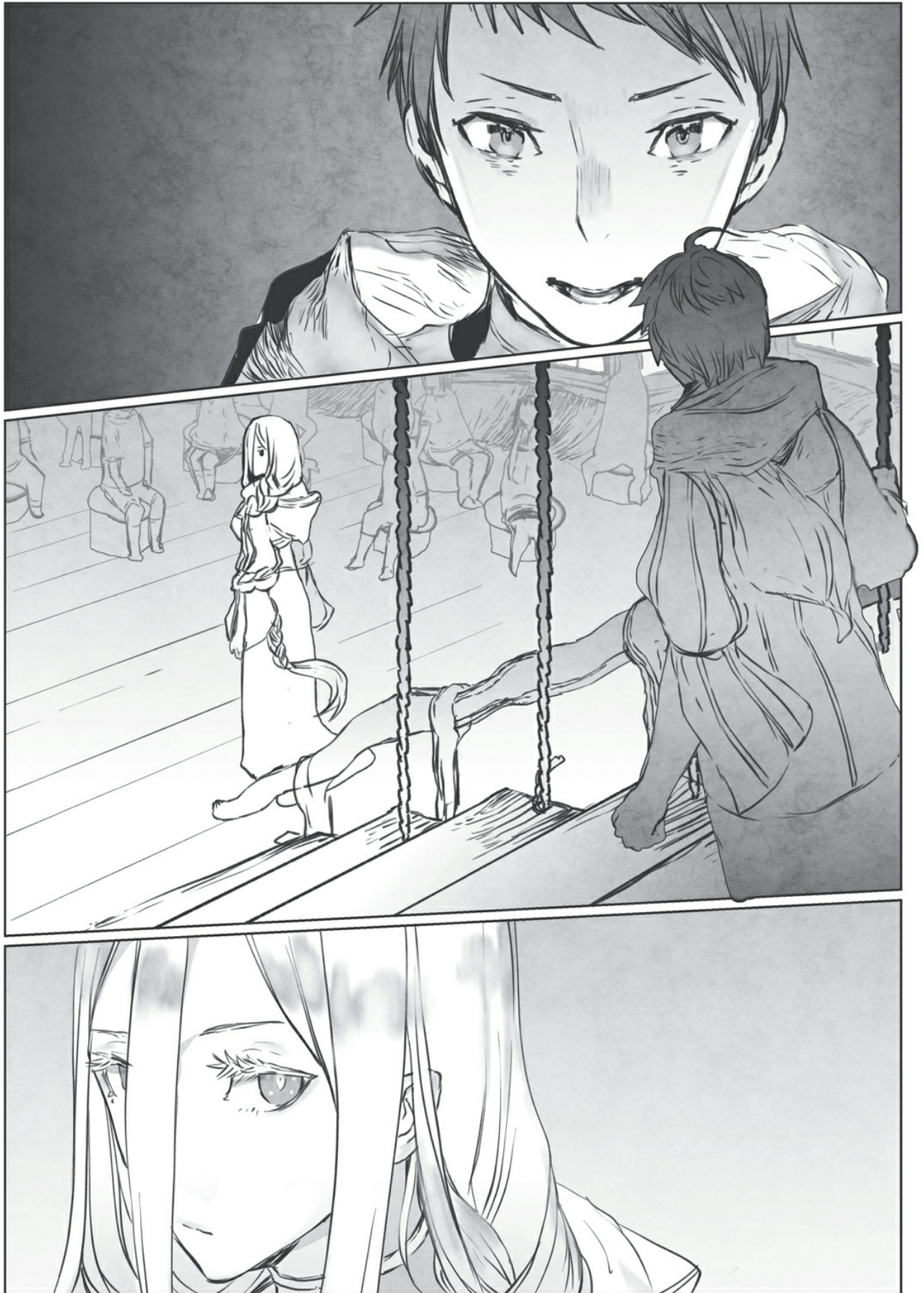
Among them, Ms. Oka looks especially pale.

"Would you mind if I listen in on this explanation, too?"

Just then, someone descends from the stairs to the second floor.

Ahh, dang it. He showed up.

With the worst possible timing, the person who's just appeared, despite supposedly being unconscious, is none other than Yamada.





WAKING TO A NEW WORLD

I'm dreaming.

"Atone."

It's an awful dream.

"Atone."

It feels like everything keeps getting worse and worse.

"Atone."

I want to do something, but no matter what I try, my actions only seem to make everything worse.

It feels like I'm being dragged down into an endless swamp.

The more I struggle, the deeper it sucks me in.

And just as my entire body gets dragged under the surface...

I wake with a start.

I guess I was having a bad dream.

The kind of nightmare that leaves you feeling utterly hopeless.

When I open my eyes, the first thing I see is an unfamiliar ceiling.

As I stare up at it blankly, I sense someone moving right next to me.

"Shun! You're awake?!"

Looking toward the source of the frantic voice, I find Katia sitting next to me.

Her face, like her voice, shows anxiety, fatigue, and most of all relief.

"Are you all right?"

"Uh...yeah. I'm fine."

Under the pressure of Katia's intensity, I automatically respond.

"Oh, good. When you wouldn't wake up no matter how much Healing Magic I

used on you...I thought you might never open your eyes again.”

Katia must have been by my side using Healing Magic all this time.

That explains why she looks so tired.

Just as that thought crosses my mind, she suddenly breaks down in tears.

“Huh? Wha—?!”

“Thank goodness. I’m so glad...”

I flail around, uncertain what to do about Katia’s crying.

“C’mon, I’m fine. See? Nothing’s wrong. Okay?”

I try to show her that I’m perfectly intact. I know it’s a pathetic attempt at comfort, but I figure it’s better than nothing at all.

It is true that there’s nothing wrong with my body.

I’m not injured, and I don’t feel any pain.

Aside from being a little sluggish since I just woke up, I’m the very picture of health.

...Physically, at least.

“Are you sure you’re all right? You still look pale...”

Katia is still uncharacteristically worried.

If it was enough to make her cry, maybe I was in a worse state than I realized.

I do remember groaning a lot while I was knocked out.

It’s probably normal to be worried if someone won’t wake up even if you use Healing Magic on them and is groaning painfully in their sleep.

“Yeah, I’m okay. I guess I’m a little thirsty, though?”

I must’ve been sweating a lot in my sleep; the clothes I’m wearing are stuck to my skin, sucking up all the moisture in my body.

Now my throat is parched from all the liquid I’ve apparently lost.

“Ahh. I’ll go get you a glass of water, then.”

Katia stands immediately and sprints from the room.

Watching her go, I sink listlessly back into the bed.

There are letters floating in the corner of my vision, or maybe the back of my mind.

It's the same sensation as when you Appraise something.

These letters have been giving me an ominous feeling all this time.

Just focusing on them makes me feel a little sick.

But unlike Appraisal, I can't erase this display.

The letters spell the word "Taboo."

Fighting back the nausea, I focus on the sinister word.

Then the word "Taboo" becomes the top of a menu.

【Taboo Menu System Overview

System Header Descriptions

Update History

Points List

Reincarnation History

Special Option n% I = W】

“Urgh!”

Just opening the menu is enough to make me feel violently ill.

It’s repulsive, like being shown some kind of concentrated evil.

A chill rises within me, ignoring my thoughts and feelings.

My instincts urge me to close the menu right away, but I manage to hold out.

Still fighting the nausea, I open the System Overview.

【System Overview Conditions Prior to System Installation

MA Energy

Conditions After System Installation】

As soon as I open this menu, the nausea grows even stronger.

It's as if I can hear a voice coming from the letters.

"Atone."

The thought pounds into my skull like a curse.

I make a conscious effort to both acknowledge and ignore it, along with the nausea and discomfort it brings.

It's self-contradictory, trying to ignore it and pay attention to it at the same time.

But otherwise, I feel like I might go crazy.

To be honest, I don't want to see any more than this.

But I've got no choice.

I have to know if what I saw in that dream was true or not.

The dream I had was about an utterly hopeless story.

Rather than being from any particular person's perspective, it was like a bird's-eye view of the story of this world's past.

When Potimas, the patriarch of the elves, was still human...he brought chaos and destruction to the planet and the gods that had always lived here, all solely because he didn't want to die.

I saw the memories of the goddess Sariel and the people closest to her, who did everything they could to save the planet from total annihilation.

This is just a hunch, but I think that part was separate from this "Taboo."

Maybe someone showed it to me on purpose.

For now, I'm not going to dwell on what that person's motives were.

First, I have to find out if it's all true.

Forcing my body not to tremble, I look at each option in turn.

Before the system, MA energy, after the system.

Each heading contains information, just like what I saw in the dream.

Before the system was put into place, this planet wasn't so different from Earth.

However, there were creatures called dragons, which of course didn't exist in our world.

The writing is stiff, only listing the events without emotion.

But when I scan the words with my eyes, I feel a powerful message assaulting my mind.

"Atone."

I shake it off and keep reading.

Humanity discovered a new power source called MA energy and began to use it.

They didn't know that it was the very life force of the planet and that using it would drastically shorten the life span of the entire world.

This incurred the wrath of dragons, who nearly destroyed humanity.

But humanity was protected from the dragons by the goddess Sariel.

The dragons gave up on the planet and humans alike, and flew away.

Not long after, the MA energy was nearly entirely used up, and the countdown to the destruction of the planet began.

Forgetting that she had protected them, humans decided to try to revive the planet by using the goddess Sariel as a sacrifice.

Administrator Güliedistodiez was enraged by this.

He put the system into place in order to save Sariel.

It was meant to both uphold the goddess's wish and preserve her life.

As I read all this, Katia returns with a glass and pitcher of water.

"Shun?! You look pale as a sheet!"

Is my face really that pale?

Katia rushes over, puts the glass and pitcher aside, and places a hand on my forehead to start casting Healing Magic.

Since this is a mental condition, physical Healing Magic won't have any effect.

But Katia's consideration does soothe my aching heart.

"Thank you. I feel a little better now."

I really mean this, but Katia still gazes at me with worry on her face, looking unconvinced.

Since I've broken into a cold sweat on top of all the moisture I already lost in my sleep, I'm even thirstier than before.

I reach toward the glass Katia put next to my bed.

But before I can pick it up, Katia grabs it, fills it with water, and brings it toward my lips.

Is she trying to help me drink it?

That's kind of embarrassing, since I'm not sick or anything...

"I—I can drink it myself..."

"No, you cannot!"

Katia's intensity overpowers me, and I relent.

The cool water travels down my parched throat.

I drain the glass in seconds, and Katia fills a second glass immediately, somehow sensing that it wasn't enough.

Once I drain the second glass, I finally take a deep breath.

I was still reading the Taboo menu even as I drank.

For the most part, it was the same information from my dream.

There were a few parts missing, like Potimas's name, or the fact that the dragons stole the remaining MA energy when they left.

But other than that, it matched my dream perfectly.

I close the System Overview.

I'd like to look at the other parts of the menu, too, but I don't think I can handle it right now.

When I take a quick glance at the rest, the System Header Descriptions fill my sight so thoroughly that it's hard to even look at them.

It would be difficult enough to take it all in normally, and the pressure on my mental state grows with every letter I read. I don't see any way I could possibly read it all right now.

Giving up, I move on to the next section, the Update History. This part is just as packed with information as the last.

At that, I run out of steam completely.

I close the entire Taboo menu.

Even then, the word "Taboo" doesn't disappear from the corner of my mind, nor does the whisper that it emits.

It's not nearly as bad as when the menu is open, but I can hardly stand the thought that it might go on like this forever.

Heaving a long sigh, I get out of bed.

"Shun, you should keep resting for now."

"No, I've got to go."

I've been hearing a commotion downstairs for a while now.

This must be the second floor of this building.

I leave the room as if guided by something and walk down the stairs.

Katia follows anxiously behind me.

And when I descend the staircase, I see the same person I spotted right before I passed out.

"Would you mind if I listen in on this explanation, too?"

In response to my voice, the pure-white girl turns around.

Her multiple pupils all fix squarely on me.

The same eyes that killed my brother Julius.



THE WORLD IS TERRIBLY CRUEL

Yamada looks pretty pale, but he's still walking toward me on his own two feet.

Of course he had to show up at the worst possible timing for me, but great timing for him—leave it to Divine Protection, I guess.

Ah, now things are gonna get even more complicated.

“Good to see you again... Wakaba?”

Yamada looks at me as he speaks.

Why'd you make it sound like a question?

He came out glaring at me at first, but now he just looks kinda confused.

Is there something on my face?

Well, besides all the extra pupils in my eyes.

“Well, whatever.” Yamada shakes his head lightly and continues. “I'd like to be a part of this conversation anyway. I have the right to know that much, don't I?”

It seems like something bothered him about me, although I'm not sure what.

Well, now that he's here, there's not much I can do about it.

I guess hypothetically I could chase him out, but that would probably only complicate things in a different way.

Basically, the second Yamada showed up, things were gonna get messy one way or another.

“Sure. If you must.”

I give a halfhearted confirmation, making it clear that I'd prefer he didn't.

“Thank you.”

But Yamada ignores that, or maybe even takes it as a challenge.

Ooshima hurries in and grabs a chair for Yamada.

Yamada thanks Ooshima as he sits down, and Ooshima gets another chair and sits down by his side.

What's going on?

Why did a certain number of girls in the room all gasp when they saw that?

Once Yamada is seated, he looks around at everyone else.

His eyes stop in a few places before turning back to stare at me.

Hmm. Ughh.

Fine, then.

"Tenth Army, to me."

At my command, several white-clad figures suddenly appear.

Most of the reincarnations jump in surprise.

These are soldiers from my battalion, the Tenth Demon Army.

I'd assigned the stealthiest ones among them to hide and keep watch on the reincarnations.

Yamada somehow saw through them and looked at each spot where they were hiding.

Hey, on closer inspection, Phelmina's here, too.

You're technically my vice-commander. Why are you doing grunt work like this?

She seems to notice my bemusement, and a vein pops on her forehead.

Okay, I didn't actually see that happen, but I can tell what she's thinking.

Because you passed out on us! or something like that, I bet.

Yeah, fair enough. My bad.

"We're disbanding for now. Get some rest until your next orders."

On my command, the white-clad soldiers disappear without a sound.

I hear someone whisper something like "ninjas!"

Yeah, honestly, I feel like my Tenth Army soldiers are way better ninjas than Kusama.

Ah, looks like Phelmina went up to the third floor when the rest of them left.

I guess Hasebe is still sleeping off her confusion up there.

Someone's gotta keep an eye on her.

It seems wrong on multiple levels for a ranking officer like Phelmina to do it, but I'm not gonna say anything.

"Who were those people?"

Yamada looks at me sharply.

"Soldiers of the Demon Army Tenth Battalion. I had them watching and guarding you reincarnations."

At that, the reincarnations break into more murmuring.

I can't blame them for being freaked out that those people were so close without their even noticing.

I think it was only Shinohara, Tagawa, and Kushitani who caught on.

And probably Ms. Oka too... Or so I thought, but her eyes are so wide that she clearly didn't realize it, either.

"Elites from the demon army, then?"

Nah, they're just normal foot soldiers.

Oh, but I guess they're a lot stronger than soldiers from the other battalions, thanks to my intense training, so I guess you could call them elites, maybe?

Well, that's just a minor quibble.

They're standard soldiers, basically.

Yamada doesn't look so hot.

Maybe he's realizing how much stronger my soldiers were than he was, after seeing how they move.

As the Hero, Yamada's strength is a far cry from that of any normal human.

But strong as he might be, that's still within the range of human limits.

He's nowhere near me or the Demon Lord in her prime, or even the likes of Vampy and Mr. Oni.

In fact, even those white-clad soldiers might've been able to beat him with a little luck.

Probably not one-on-one, but I could see it working with at least two of them against him.

No, seriously.

Then again, since he's got the deus ex machina skill Divine Protection, he might be able to win a fight that would otherwise be beyond him.

"So, you were saying? You used Hugo, or rather Natsume, as a decoy to attack this place. Why?"

Yamada comes out swinging with the questions.

Umm, wow, okay.

You're really gonna go there, huh...?

I glance over at Ms. Oka.

Yeah, I know.

I can't avoid talking about this sooner or later.

But once I say it, it's gonna put Ms. Oka in an awkward position for sure.

I see. I guess I should get it over with.

"The leader of the elves, Potimas Harrifenas, is a threat to this entire world. He brings nothing but harm to the world. The demon army and the Word of God religion teamed up to stop him, which brought about this battle."

At that, Ms. Oka's mouth drops open.

It's clear from her expression that she has no idea what I'm talking about.

Yamada, on the other hand, accepts my words with surprising calmness.

Next to him, Ooshima wears a complicated expression of half surprise, half understanding, so this stuff about Potimas is probably new information.

“First of all, elves have been a threat to this world for a very, very long time. Officially, they tried to stop humans and demons from fighting and worked in the name of true world peace, but that was all just a masquerade to hide their true nature. Behind the scenes, they were bleeding the planet dry, severely shortening its life span. Potimas Harrifenas was the chief offender; though he was warned repeatedly by multiple parties in the know to stop his evil deeds, he refused to listen. The fact of the matter is that the planet is on the brink of destruction, so extreme measures had to be taken to stop him.”

The reincarnations mutter among themselves at this sudden large-scale explanation.

“Wait a minute!” Kudo half rises from her chair. “If that’s true, what’s going to happen to this planet?”

Well, seeing is believing.

I weave a spell to project an image of this planet.

A globe appears above everyone’s head, showing the planet’s current state.

At a glance, it’s clear that half the planet has fallen apart.

“This is the current state of this planet.”

Stunned silence.

That was the reaction of everyone present.

This image must be a huge shock to everyone except Vampy and Mr. Oni, who already knew.

I hear murmurs like “It can’t be...” and “No way...”

Yamada is no exception, staring up at the image with his eyes wide.

“This has to be fake, right?”

Even the levelheaded Kudo can’t keep her lips from trembling as she gazes at it.

“It’s not fake. Would you like to go see it for yourselves?”

No one takes me up on that offer.

Nobody would want to go somewhere so completely destroyed.

I mean, I could just put up a barrier to protect us, but it's not like they know that.

They're all speechless.

We gathered them here to explain what kind of situation they've gotten caught up in.

Now that they know it's not just some empire situation, but a matter of the planet's survival, it seems like their brains have all stopped working.

The reincarnations gaze at the image of the ruined planet.

The first one to recover is Kudo.

"So if this image *is* real, how many years does this planet have left?"

That brings the rest of the class back to their senses.

Yeah, I guess in a situation like this, you wouldn't be surprised to hear that the planet will fall apart completely in a matter of days. It certainly does look grim.

"Don't worry. At the very least, it won't be destroyed in your lifetimes."

If my calculations are correct, the planet won't actually collapse if things go on like this.

At the very least, it should last long enough for the reincarnations to live out their life spans.

Except maybe someone like Ms. Oka, who has the long life span of an elf.

We did get rid of Potimas, the biggest cause of wasteful energy use, so it should be able to slowly recover from now on.

Yes, with enough time, it will recover on its own.

Thing is, that's gonna require certain sacrifices.

Namely, the goddess Sariel, who currently serves as the system's core.

Sariel has almost been used up completely by the system by now.

She's not going to last much longer.

On top of that, I'd say the souls of the people living on this planet have deteriorated to a dangerous level, too.

The reason the demon race is struggling with a low birth rate is because they can't be reborn anymore, due to the deterioration of souls.

Souls that are reincarnated over and over build up a lot of wear and tear.

If you keep making them reincarnate anyway, eventually those souls will be destroyed.

Then they'll never be able to reincarnate again.

Black has been quarantining people whose souls are reaching their limits in a certain area, but that's only treating the symptom, not the root cause.

What Black is doing there is keeping people from acquiring skills as much as possible, which is basically the same thing Potimas did to the reincarnations.

That way, they can live out their lives without adding any unnecessary skills to their souls, since acquiring and improving skills takes a toll on one's soul.

That's all well and good for a healthy soul, but a soul that's deteriorating might not be able to handle much more.

Still, even if you prevent them from acquiring new skills, the souls won't be able to heal.

It's basically like slowing the progress of a disease.

The only way for souls to recover from deterioration is to convalesce without reincarnating for a while.

And if more souls are resting, then the birth rate goes down.

Which means the population of the world gradually declines.

Since humans have a higher total population than demons, the effects aren't obvious yet.

But eventually, it's going to become a problem.

As the population decreases, the recovery of the planet shows, and over time, souls will start deteriorating further.

Will the planet recover first, or will the souls finally hit their limits?

It's like a game of chicken on a planetary scale.

Still, that's got nothing to do with the reincarnations.

Once their lives end here, their souls will return to the regular cycle of rebirth, not the one in this world.

So they don't need to worry about that future.

"In our lifetimes... You mean our children's generation will be in danger?"

Kudo's words catch me by surprise a little.

Children?

My eyes automatically shift toward Kudo's belly, but she notices and hastily explains herself.

"I'm not pregnant or anything, of course. I meant in the future."

Ahhh.

Gotcha, gotcha.

Future children, huh...?

I hadn't even thought about that.

You might call it a blind spot, or just a difference in perspective.

For one thing, from my point of view, having children in this world would be an absolutely insane thing to do.

Not that I ever thought about having kids in the first place.

My spider babies?

Yeah, no, those doesn't count.

In this world, having a baby means giving birth to someone's reincarnated life.

A stranger being born out of your own stomach.

I mean, I guess that's true on Earth, too, in a way, but in this world you could even end up with the reborn version of somebody you knew.

Worst-case scenario, it could even be somebody you killed, or something like

that.

If they knew the truth, most people wouldn't even think about having kids, right?

In fact, that's probably why the Word of God pontiff led humanity to forget about that fact.

These people are being kept alive and forcefully reborn as an atonement, mere machines to save up energy.

What would people do if they found out?

Suicide? Yeah, maybe.

But then they'd just be reborn again.

So what can anyone do to get out of this purgatory?

You just have to sacrifice your entire existence.

I would never do that, of course, but I can see why some humans might want to cease to exist in the face of this ugly truth.

Besides, a single human sacrificed only adds up to a small amount of energy recovered.

That might be useful for a short while, but in the long run, you can get way more energy from someone who keeps being reborn over and over.

It's not just that people forgot the truth—they had no other choice.

But what would be the point of saying it right now?

If they don't know any better, they might still be able to form happy families.

"Well, I can say that this planet won't fall apart anytime soon. We took out Potimas to prevent its destruction, in fact. Without him, the decline of the world will stop, and over time it should gradually recover."

None of that is a lie.

It just so happens that I plan to mess with a bunch of other stuff before that happens, is all.

I'm not gonna touch on the whole having children thing, either.

Talking about that would only make them unhappy.

There are plenty of things in this world that you're better off not knowing.

Although since the birth rate is declining, I dunno if they'd even end up having kids anyway.

Besides, do you have someone to have kids with or what?

"Potimas is the person who was keeping us confined here, right?"

Kudo puts a hand on her forehead as she speaks.

She's looking not at me but at Ms. Oka.

Unable to deny the word "confined," she sits in stunned silence like her mind has gone blank.

Maybe all this new information has overloaded her thoughts.

But Ms. Oka is a strong person. I'm sure she'll be fine.

I change the image from the state of this planet to a recording of the battle that just took place.

It shows the countless sea urchins and pyramid floating above the forest.

Not to mention the machine soldiers stomping around down below.

These sci-fi weapons look out of place in this fantasy world.

"Potimas wanted energy to run these machines. That energy is actually the life force of this planet. This planet is in its current state because he drained so much energy out of it."

They've never seen anything like this in their current lives, and probably only on a screen in their previous lives.

The reincarnations stare at the image raptly.

"Potimas was gathering reincarnations because he wanted their unique powers. He was evidently planning to use those for evil deeds."

He was actually going to throw them all in a blender in the hopes of gaining eternal youth, but I don't want to tell them such gory details.

I mean, normally the words "eternal youth" would be enough to make most

people snort.

If I tell them that he did all this awful stuff just because he was really, truly hoping to live forever, I feel like they wouldn't even believe me.

"So what are you saying? That he abducted and imprisoned us to use us?"

"Yes."

I don't deny a word of Kudo's question.

It's all true, anyway.

"Wh...then...why...did I...how...?"

Hmm?

What's that now?

Turning toward the source of the unintelligible words, I see that Ms. Oka has fallen from her chair in a convulsive fit.

"Ms. Oka! Please, calm down!"

Yamada is the first to move.

He jumps from his chair and runs over to the fallen teacher, checking her for injuries.

Ms. Oka opens her tear-filled eyes, breathing unsteadily and still convulsing at times.

She keeps trying to catch her breath but looks pained... Is she hyperventilating?

Yamada gently lifts Ms. Oka into a sitting position and uses Healing Magic.

But Healing Magic in this world is really just a way of repairing a broken structure; it can't heal an illness.

I'm not sure if hyperventilating counts as an illness or not, but I do know Healing Magic can't fix it.

"Move."

I push aside Yamada, who can only use Healing Magic, and call out to her, and peer into Ms. Oka's eyes.

Then I use an Evil Eye.

I give it the opposite effect from the usual.

My Evil Eye normally instills fear in anything it sees, which means it directly affects the target's heart and mind.

I've never done it before, but if it can give fear to a target, theoretically it should be able to restore calm to a target, too.

Peering into my Evil Eyes, Ms. Oka gives one big spasm.

But then her convulsing calms down.

Her breathing is still ragged, though, and she's still shaking a little.

"Ms. Oka, it's okay. It's all right."

I speak to her gently, trying not to agitate her mind any further.

"It's all right," I repeat over and over.

At the same time, I clasp her hand tightly.

Slowly, Ms. Oka's breathing starts to settle down.

But even once her breathing stabilizes, tears continue to stream from her eyes.

And she still convulses occasionally like a hiccup, probably from all that sobbing.

Her face is a mess of tears and snot.

I wipe the goo away with my sleeve, but it keeps overflowing.

Ms. Oka keeps crying for a while.

Since her elf body grows more slowly, Ms. Oka looks younger than the other reincarnations.

Based on her appearance alone, it isn't that strange to see her sobbing like this.

But it must be a shocking sight to the reincarnations.

Unlike the rest, she's their former teacher and the only adult among them.

I'm sure seeing an adult like her break down in front of them without any shame or dignity was totally unexpected.

Even I hadn't expected it.

"It's all right. It's all right."

I put my hand on her small back and pat her softly.

"You didn't do anything wrong," I tell her gently. "Putting your life on the line to fight for your students could never be wrong."

At that, I notice Kudo looking away awkwardly.

My eyes are fixed on Ms. Oka, but I always use my X-ray vision to keep an eye on my surroundings, so I can see them whether I'm trying to or not.

Judging by that reaction, I can tell Kudo is still suspicious of Ms. Oka.

But the fact is, she doesn't know how desperately Ms. Oka struggled to save her students.

Nor does she know that Ms. Oka was so serious about protecting them that she would collapse like this from shock when she found out that the reason the reincarnations were gathered here was for Potimas to use them.

As far as the latter goes, that was a miscalculation on my part, too.

I didn't think Ms. Oka would fall apart like this.

I was so sure that a brave teacher like her would be fine, even if she found out the truth.

"Potimas was cunning and evil, it's true. But you honestly worked hard for your students' sakes, didn't you, Ms. Oka? That definitely wasn't a mistake. Besides, everyone's here and alive now, thanks to you."

I keep speaking softly to the still-sobbing Ms. Oka.

It's true that Potimas was using Ms. Oka, but she still saved many reincarnations' lives.

This world is much harsher than Earth, you know.

I've come close to death more times than I can count, as have Vampy and Mr.

Oni.

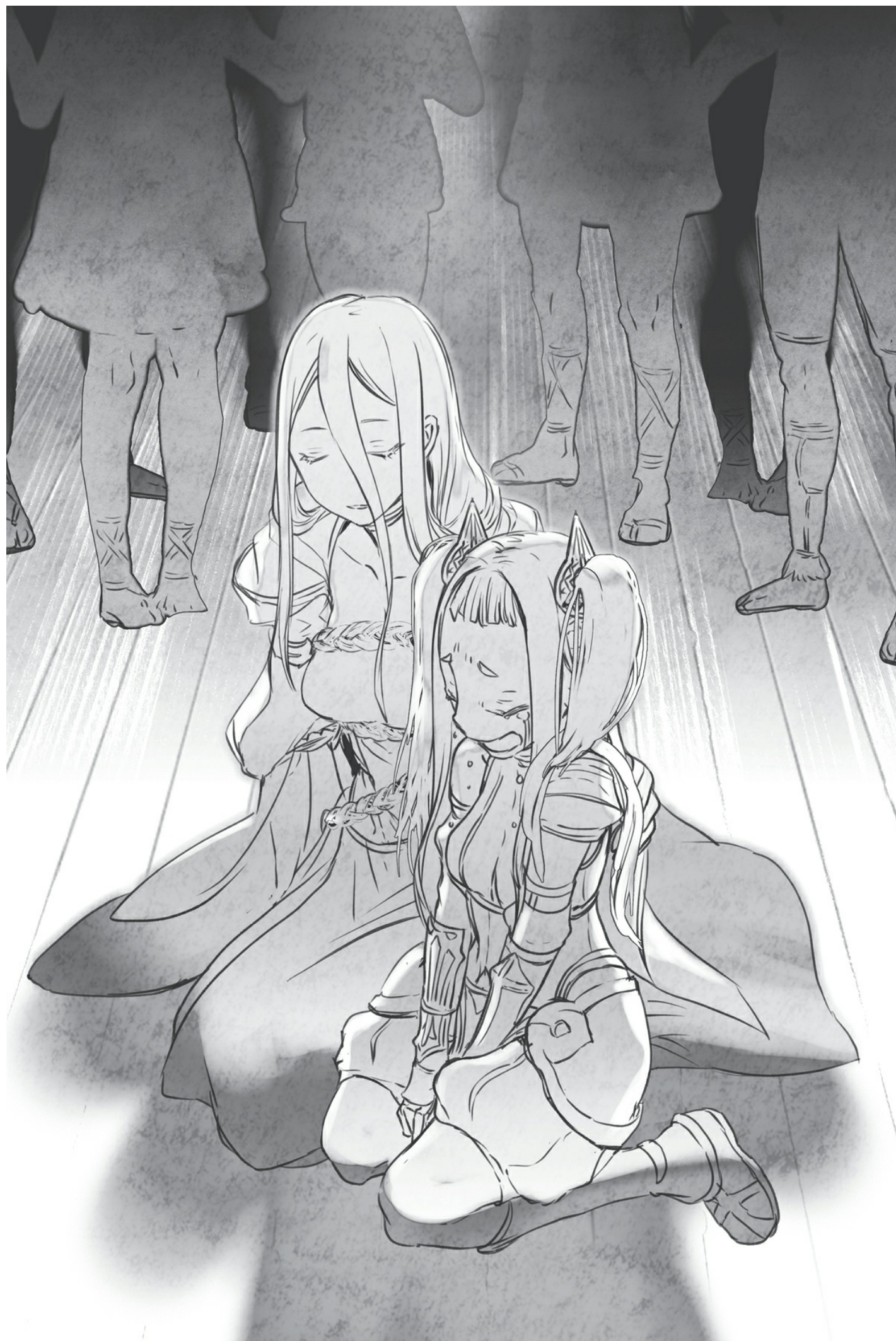
And the truth is, we were just lucky.

We could've just as easily died.

That goes for the other reincarnations, too; aside from the ones who were born into privileged families like Yamada, most of them have probably lived close to death every day.

If Ms. Oka hadn't taken them into protection, more than half the people here might be dead by now.

Plus, since all the reincarnations were gathered here in the elf village, I was able to defeat Potimas without any worries about them.



There's no need for Ms. Oka to feel so fretful when everything worked out fine.

"It's...not...everyone!" Ms. Oka chokes out between sobs. "I couldn't...save...them! I...I failed...to protect...them!"

She wails in such despair that I feel like I've just seen the true meaning of the word.

Her words are broken and raspy, her voice far from loud.

But it still echoes like nothing else.

There are other reincarnations who aren't here besides Hasebe and the others, who are just unconscious.

Issei Sakurazaki.

Naofumi Kogure.

Kouta Hayashi.

Three reincarnations we'll never see again.

Evidently, Ms. Oka feels responsible for their deaths.

There's nothing I can say to that.

But I don't think that responsibility was ever hers in the first place.

Their lives were their own, as were their deaths.

I don't see why Ms. Oka should carry the weight of that responsibility.

Maybe she thinks she might have been able to save them, but everyone has their limits.

It's arrogant to think you can save everyone.

Unless you're all-seeing and all-powerful, you can't save every single person.

Even I can't do that.

Ms. Oka kept crying like a child for a long time after that, muttering half-incoherently all the while.

Why...? I couldn't save them... What was it all for...?

After a long time, Ms. Oka finally stops crying.

But her eyes look empty somehow, devoid of life.

“Miss Wakaba...” Kushitani, who’s been silently watching all this time, finally speaks to me. “Ms. Oka looks tired, so I’ll put her to bed for now. I don’t think she can handle any more than this anyway. You can carry on talking while I keep an eye on her.”

Honestly, I couldn’t ask for more than that.

I don’t think it would be wise to leave Ms. Oka alone right now.

I’d like to keep an eye on her myself, but it’s probably not ideal to abandon everyone else to tend to her, either.

Kudo and the others still seem to have reservations about Ms. Oka. I can’t leave them in charge of her with such mixed feelings.

Since Kushitani came to the elf village only recently, she should be able to watch Ms. Oka without getting emotional about it.

She’s also one of the few reincarnations who can handle herself in battle—I can’t think of a more perfect person to entrust with this.

Vampy is out of the question, and Mr. Oni might not be the best choice for nursing someone back to health.

“Could you?”

“Leave it to me.”

Kushitani lifts Ms. Oka up, bridal-style.

Then, after exchanging glances with Tagawa, she heads upstairs.

It should be all right to trust her with this. She’s got a good head on her shoulders.

Even if the worst happens and Ms. Oka tries to harm herself, I’m sure Kushitani can stop her.

Once the pair are gone, an awkward silence fills the room.

After seeing their teacher like that, the reincarnations must realize how

desperately she was fighting to protect them.

Yet Kudo and the other reincarnations in her protection openly distrusted her.

Maybe they feel bad about that now.

After Kushitani carried Ms. Oka out, nobody tried to say a word.

They're all just sinking in silence, unsure what to do next.

But there are a few different responses between them.

Some are looking around uncertainly.

In these cases, it seems like they really don't know what to do and are waiting for something to happen.

Some are looking toward Kudo.

There are a few variations on this one: Some seem accusing, while others seem to be hoping that she'll take charge of the next steps as the former class rep.

It's easy to tell which is which, that's for sure.

And the majority of them...are looking at me.

I mean, yeah.

I guess if it falls to anyone to keep the discussion going in this situation, it would be me.

As much as I'd love to shove that role off on someone else!

Umm...urgh...

For now, I go back to my seat and sit down.

I don't know if it's because I've been acting out of character or talking too much, but I'm totally exhausted.

We can just call it a day now, right?

No, huh?

...I was afraid you'd say that.

"You're really kind, huh...?"

An unexpected person breaks the awkward silence.

Or maybe I shouldn't be surprised?

"But then why did you...? No, forget it..."

Right after breaking the silence, Yamada goes quiet again, his expression an unreadable mix of emotions.

I can't tell from his face what he was going to say.

In fact, it seems like even he hasn't gotten his emotions sorted out.

But after being frozen in the same posture since I pushed him aside, he finally slumps back into his own seat, as if all the strength has gone out of him and left him to collapse.

Looking worried, Ooshima gently pats his shoulder.

Then Yamada pats that hand in return, as if to say there's nothing to worry about.

Get a room, you two.

"Why don't you have a seat, too, class rep?" Mr. Oni says to Kudo, who's still standing.

After briefly making a face like a lost child, Kudo takes him up on his suggestion and sits down.

"Now, I'm sure you all have things you want to say," Mr. Oni goes on gently. "Since we lived outside the elf village, we only know secondhand what it was like for you living here, and I won't pretend to understand how you all feel. But I think it should be clear to all of you from what you just saw that Ms. Oka didn't push you all in here for the fun of it. She did it out of good intentions, not evil. I hope you can keep in mind that she did everything out of desperation to protect you."

Some of the reincarnations listen seriously, while others seem uncomfortable.

"...I wish she would have told us that, then." Kudo hangs her head, murmuring quietly.

Kudo and Ms. Oka got along pretty well in their previous lives.

I'm sure that's why she resented Ms. Oka so strongly in this one.

Maybe she felt like she'd been betrayed.

And since Ms. Oka never really explained herself, those ill feelings got even worse.

"She couldn't say anything."

So I'll step in to explain on her behalf.

"What do you mean?"

"Ms. Oka's unique skill is very unusual, and it comes with a penalty. That's all I can tell you."

Kudo and several of the others look shocked at that.

Ms. Oka's skill is called Student Roster.

From what I'm told, it gives her information about her students.

However, she's not allowed to share that information with the students themselves.

Because there's a penalty if she does.

I don't know what the penalty is, exactly, whether it's big or small.

Maybe it can't even be measured like that.

Since D is the one who made this skill, anything is possible.

Honestly, even my alluding to her skill like this might be walking on eggshells, for all I know.

I'd hate to explain Ms. Oka's skill and activate some kind of penalty as a result.

So I only give them the bare minimum of information.

Luckily, Kudo seems to understand what I'm getting at, enough to help her let go of some of her animosity toward Ms. Oka.

...Although she looks even guiltier because of it.

But that's to be expected.

From here on out, they'll have to try and mend that relationship themselves over time.

I don't think it's my place to get involved in that.

"...I see. So that's how it is... I'm sorry, though. I don't think I can apologize to Ms. Oka right away. Even if I understand it in theory, I can't bring myself to apologize for the wasted time we lost in this place."

Kudo doesn't raise her head as she speaks sadly.

She must have mixed feelings about all this, too.

Even knowing that Ms. Oka wasn't in the wrong, she still spent a lot of time being confined here in the elf village.

I mean, she was taken in not long after she was born.

That's around the same length as her previous life was, or maybe even longer, if you consider that she was cognizant at a much younger age.

"Yeah, I agree."

"Here we are in a fantasy world, yet we were penned up all this time."

"We were prisoners, even if it was for our protection."

A few voices quietly agree with Kudo.

"But it wasn't all bad, was it? We were given food and shelter."

"I wouldn't say it was the lap of luxury, but I guess I had no complaints."

"Yeah, after seeing her like that, I can't really stay mad at her."

Other voices speak up on Ms. Oka's behalf.

I'd say it's about an even split.

But I think each side understands where the other is coming from, like they're really talking things out.

Most of them had problems with their life here.

But they can't fully blame Ms. Oka, either.

That's the vibe I get.

If anything, I'd say the boys have more complaints.

Maybe because they grew up wanting to go on adventures and such?

They kept giving Tagawa jealous looks over his life on the outside as an adventurer, for one thing.

In fact, maybe he's the reason they feel like they should've gotten the same chance.

Like, *"If only I wasn't stuck in here, I could've been one, too!"*

I wonder if they actually would've managed that, though...?

"Just so you guys know, life on the outside isn't so great, either..."

Oh, hey, Tagawa's speaking up now.

"That's not convincing coming from you, dude," one of the boys counters.

Fair enough.

A successful adventurer like Tagawa saying that just sounds like bragging.

"Then lemme ask you this. Have you ever spent a whole day groaning in pain? Or if not, have you at least broken a bone or gotten a bad cut or anything like that?"

Most of the male reincarnations exchange glances.

"I did break a bone one time when I screwed up working in the field."

"Okay, then imagine if that happened every single day."

Tagawa looks at the boy casually.

"Huh?"

"When you're an adventurer, injuries like that literally happen every day. You might get patched up with Healing Magic, only to get injured again right away. You gotta get used to having fresh wounds all the time or you'll never hack it. And by the way, if I didn't have Asaka, I probably would've given up ages ago."

Is he being serious or just gushing about his girlfriend? It's hard to tell.

"I took on the dangerous job of adventurer because of many brushes with death, and if Asaka wasn't there, I really would be dead several times over by

now. I'm telling you this for your own good—if you want to be an adventurer just 'cause it sounds fun, don't do it."

Tagawa looks around at the boys intently.

Hrmmm.

Really, though, are you serious or just smitten?

"So yeah, being an adventurer is extra dangerous, but it's still scary out there, no matter who you are. I've seen all kinds of tragedies while working in the field as an adventurer. People who got killed by monsters or bandits. And it's not just the ones who die. It's the kids who get left behind, or the ones who get abandoned 'cause their folks can't afford to feed 'em. Your family was poor, right, class rep? Wonder what would've happened to you if you weren't in here."

This cruel statement is directed at Kudo.

She looks away, unable to refute him.

After all, her parents really did sell her.

It just so happened to be to the elves, but it could've easily been to someone else.

In that case, she probably wouldn't have been sold as a baby, but even if she got to grow up a little more first, it's anyone's guess as to where she might have been sold.

If her parents picked up on her intelligence as a reincarnation and were able to sell her into the care of a fancy merchant or something, that would probably be fine.

But she also could've gotten sold on the basis of her good looks into any number of sketchy situations, and that could've happened to any of the other reincarnations, too.

Mr. Oni claps his hands to quiet them now.

"Not that there's much point arguing over who had it better or what might've been, if you ask me. We can't change the past, you know. The irreversible fact is that we're all alive here right now. And the deaths of the people who aren't

here are irreversible, too. Just remember that we're lucky to be alive to talk about what fate would've been better for us and things like that."

We're lucky just to be alive.

The reincarnations all fall into silence at that.

Except for one.

"How can you say that after killing all those elves?"

Yamada's statement reveals to everyone that Mr. Oni slaughtered a bunch of elves.

By now, I imagine it's obvious to everyone that the demon army defeated the elves, meaning Kudo and the others have probably guessed what happened to them.

But knowing that and truly understanding it are two different things.

They might know in theory that the elves were killed, but it's probably hard for that to sink in right now, never mind the idea that one of their own classmates played a part in it himself.

Sure enough, a chill settles over the room.

The only unfazed people are Kusama and Ogiwara, who were on our side, and Tagawa.

Even Kudo is speechless, and the others can't seem to process what Yamada said at all, to the point where some are just staring blankly.

Even those who understood seem to doubt whether it's true, peering at other people's faces for their reactions.

I'm guessing death is a faraway concept to the reincarnations who lived here in the elf village.

So it probably doesn't feel real to be told that people they knew are dead.

Especially if it was a former classmate who sent them to their deaths.

I guess it probably doesn't help their grasp of the situation that people rarely die in Japan of anything but natural causes.

A world like this, where your friends and others are always dropping like flies, has far too different a concept of death for them to grasp.

On the other hand, people like Tagawa and Kusama, who lived outside the elf village, have a solid understanding of how death is viewed in this world. That's why they're not freaking out.

But if that's the case, why is Yamada so angry about it, when he was raised on the outside, too?

I thought I'd explained enough for them to understand that the elves were better off dead.

"Shun, just so you know, the elves have done such terrible things that they deserved death. So it doesn't matter if I'm the one who killed them."

"Of course it matters!"

While Mr. Oni's tone is one of gentle rebuke, Yamada's reaction is fierce.

Even I'm a little taken aback by it.

"Shun, weren't you listening?"

"Yes, I was. And I get that what the elves did probably was unforgivable."

Oh?

So Yamada does realize the elves were bad.

He was fighting on their side, so I thought maybe he was too far gone to stop defending the elves, but I guess not.

"But that doesn't mean it's right to just kill them all and be done with it."

A few of the reincarnations look like they agree with Yamada.

...Yeah, I guess that's fair.

Considering that they were raised in the isolated environment of the elf village, it's no wonder they'd still have the same sense of values from their old lives.

Back in Japan, criminals are punished in accordance with the law.

The death penalty is reserved for only incredibly heinous crimes.

There was even a movement to abolish the death penalty, too.

Lives are valued very differently in that world, compared to this one—even the lives of criminals.

“The elves should have lived to make up for their sins. They had a duty to do so. You can’t just kill them and let that be the end of it. Once they’re dead, it’s all over.”

Hmm. I understand his logic, but it’s...kinda naive, to be honest.

There are plenty of evildoers who don’t have the slightest desire to make up for their sins, y’know?

The idea that any villain will repent if you talk their ear off long enough only holds true in opportunistic fairy tales.

If you keep trying to reform someone who’s determined to stay evil, you’re just wasting everyone’s time.

In which case, you might as well just kill ’em all and save yourself the trouble, right?

At least, that’s my opinion.

“You’re right.” Mr. Oni nods. “Once they’re dead, it’s all over. Killing people is bad. That much is obvious. It’s an unforgivable sin.”

“Then why—?” Yamada starts to say, but Mr. Oni cuts him off.

“In that case, it’s only fair that we couldn’t forgive the elves for taking so many lives both directly and indirectly, right?”

His voice is intense enough to silence Yamada.

“Look, Shun. If someone kills a person you care about, you’re not gonna be able to forgive them, even if you want to. No matter how hard they try to make up for their sin, the hatred in your heart just won’t go away. It might fade, but it’ll never be gone completely.”

Those words carry the weight of firsthand experience.

It’s heavy enough that anyone listening can tell that someone Mr. Oni cared about was killed in the past.

“What you’re saying is very noble. But the elves were in no position to earn penance, no matter what. They had to die. So we performed their last rites. Do you understand now?”

Mr. Oni’s heavy words are enough to silence any objection from Yamada...

Or so I thought.

“No, I don’t think I do.”

There’s a powerful gleam in Yamada’s eyes.

It’s clear at a glance that he’s not going to back down.

“Even if that’s a good enough explanation for the elves, what about the imperial army? Your side used Hugo and his army as a decoy to attack us, right? How do you justify using the imperial army soldiers as decoys and letting them die?”

...Oof, that’s hitting me where it hurts.

It’s true, from Yamada’s perspective, that the imperial soldiers are just victims who got roped into this whole mess.

I can see why that’d be hard to accept.

The other reincarnations are muttering among themselves, too.

Or at least they look uncomfortable, though no one’s actually talking.

“Excuse me. Is that true?”

Kudo breaks the silence.

Mr. Oni and Yamada just keep staring each other down.

Glancing at them, Kudo turns toward me instead.

Wait, why meeee?!

“If it is true, then does that mean you used Natsume, and then killed the imperial army soldiers?”

I mean, yeah, more or less...

“I won’t deny that.”

“I’ll take that as confirmation, then.”

Kudo’s expression hardens as she responds.

Well, she’s not exactly wrong...

If anything, I think what we actually did is even more vicious than what she’s imagining, but I’ll just keep that to myself.

I’m sure both parties will be happier that way. Totally.

“I won’t deny that we used them. But this is war. There were bound to be casualties, right?”

Mr. Oni is going on the offensive.

“But...!”

“If the imperial army hadn’t died, the demon army would’ve died instead. And the imperial army are enemies of the demon army. We used our enemy, that’s all. Was there anything strategically wrong with what we did?”

He’s right: We pitted our enemy against another enemy and let them wear each other down, reaping the profits.

Strategically speaking, it’s a smart and effective move.

“That’s not what we’re talking about!”

But yeah, I don’t think that’s what Yamada was getting at.

“Shun. You’ve seen enough of this world to know how it works, right? It’s not like Japan. Lives aren’t valued nearly as much. What’s the point in trying to preserve the same sense of values in a different world?”

Mr. Oni tries to convince the stubborn Yamada, but it has the opposite effect.

“What’s the point? How can you say that? Sure, lives here don’t carry the same weight. That’s why even my brother Julius... No, that’s not the point right now. But still! That doesn’t mean you can just go around carelessly taking lives away, does it?!”

By the end, he’s shouting.

There’s so much strength in his voice that I take back my comment about him

being naive.

I thought he was just dragging his values from Japan into this world, being overly optimistic.

But I was wrong.

His shout proved that he understood all that and was determined to be optimistic anyway.

“This world isn’t like Japan? No, of course it isn’t. Everything about it is different. But does that mean we have to just throw away all our values from our old lives? Is it wrong to try to uphold them?”

Ooshima, sitting behind Yamada, trembles at these words.

I guess that means that Ooshima also gave up on old values during life in this world.

“Let me ask you this, Kyouya. You said there’s no point. Are you sure you’re not compromising on your values just because that’s how this world works?”



S2 THE VALUE OF A LIFE

I don't think I'll ever forget the first time I killed a monster; it was the time I felled that earth wyrm.

This world has skills, stats, and experience points, which allow you to level up if you kill monsters.

Having been reborn in such an RPG-like world, I went through life feeling like it really was a game.

But I realized how wrong I was when Natsume, now Hugo, nearly killed me.

And then I took a monster's life with my own hands.

To be honest, it was right after that.

When Hugo almost killed me, it radically changed my views on life.

Frankly speaking, up until that point, my head was in the clouds.

I was the fourth prince, a half-baked royal.

I didn't want for anything in life, but I was largely ignored as a prince, yet not quite enough to live however I pleased.

Like my royalty, the freedom I was given was half-baked, too.

But I didn't have any complaints about that.

I got to be relatively carefree and didn't have to act like a stuffy royal all the time.

I trained and polished my skills, listened eagerly to tales of my brother Julius's heroics, and dreamed of someday being that heroic myself.

In my position, I was allowed to have such childish fantasies.

But that naive dream started to crack when Hugo tried to kill me, and it finally broke into pieces when I killed an earth wyrm shortly thereafter.

I experienced almost being killed by someone.

Then I experienced killing a monster with my own hands.

Neither of those were experiences I ever would have had in Japan.

Until then, I'd been thinking of this life as more of a game than as an extension of my previous life.

Like a bonus stage after I'd already died.

But the murderous intent Hugo directed toward me was real, and the sensation of defeating that earth wyrm was horribly vivid.

When I was fighting Hugo, I was so confused and overwhelmed that I didn't have time to feel fear, but after I was saved, my body started shaking.

And when I fought the earth wyrm, I was so absorbed in the battle that I couldn't think about what it would mean to take a life, until I saw the corpse and threw up.

On top of that, I later learned that it was Fei's parent.

That earth wyrm might have been searching for Fei, its child, for years.

Once that thought crossed my mind, I couldn't view this life as a game anymore.

From then on, I was afraid of fighting monsters.

But the experience of almost being killed by Hugo kept that fear in check.

I had to get stronger, or I wouldn't even be able to protect myself.

After fighting Hugo and then the earth wyrm, I knew for a fact that I couldn't become a strong and noble hero who protects all of humanity like Julius.

I realized that fighting by my brother's side was a far more distant dream than I'd imagined.

I could never carry a heavy burden like the fate of humanity.

But I wanted to at least get strong enough to protect the people around me.

So I chose to face off against monsters once again.

At school, we had one-on-one practice fights against monsters.

Since they were meant to fight inexperienced students, those monsters were fairly weak.

They were practically rodents, small enough that even an adult without much battle experience could probably take care of them.

But still, monsters are monsters.

They're vermin that aggressively attack humans; even the weakest ones can cause harm if they're not killed.

No matter how weak, any monster is capable of being dangerous.

The kind that can be defeated by any adult would still be dangerous to children, for example.

And an adult could still get hurt dealing with it, or even killed if they're not careful.

Even those weak monsters still kill or injure people every year.

In fact, the hands-on monster fights at the academy were intended to cull monsters as much as they were for the students to get experience.

So it wouldn't make sense to hesitate to kill a monster.

And yet...

Whenever a monster tried to kill me, I could feel its living intentions.

It was thinking and acting on its own like a living being, not just a program in a game.

I was being naive about fighting monsters, or in fact any living thing at all.

And I don't mean that I was underestimating them.

My stats are on the higher side for my age, and I could easily defeat a weak monster on my own.

But it wasn't about that.

It's hard to put the feeling into words.

But having faced down a monster in the form of that earth wyrm, I learned that fighting was a very real and terrifying experience.

In short, I was afraid.

Of the monster closing in on me, trying to kill me...and of the idea of killing it

myself.

Every time I tried to bring my sword down on a monster, I remembered the dead body of the earth wyrm.

In the end, I couldn't kill a monster in my first match and settled for dodging their attacks.

Then Parton, another member of my group, noticed my struggle and finished it off.

Just like that.

"Why...?" I asked him.

Even I'm not sure what I was asking "why" about, exactly.

I just blurted out the only word that came to mind.

"Oh, sorry. It looked like you were having a hard time, so I just jumped in."

Parton responded with the assumption that I was demanding why he'd stolen prey from me.

"I guess I went overboard, though. I should've realized you wouldn't struggle with a monster that weak, Prince Schlain. Oh, I get it! You were watching the monster's movements! So you observe even the weakest monsters without letting your guard down. That's good to know."

No. You're wrong.

That's not what I was asking, or why I couldn't defeat the monster.

But I get it now.

Whether I want to or not.

This is the big difference between this world and Japan.

In this world, lives are taken lightly.

Way too lightly.

It's normal to kill monsters.

You have to kill them, because they're enemies.

Even humans can start killing each other at the drop of a hat.

And the people in this world have no regard at all for the lives they've taken.

They take lives like it's just another chore.

Parton didn't show any signs of feeling anything about killing a monster, either.

Not that I'm one to talk.

I did eat meat when I lived in Japan, and I killed bugs sometimes, too.

I can't claim that the lives of insects, animals, and humans should all be valued equally.

And I know that monsters are harmful creatures that attack humans, and you have to kill them or be killed yourself.

But it felt wrong to kill monsters as casually as killing insects.

In the end, though, I still gritted my teeth and killed a monster myself that day.

I was afraid of betraying the admiration in Parton's eyes.

Most of all, I remembered the time Hugo attacked and almost killed me.

I knew I had to get strong enough that I could at least protect myself, and I used that as motivation to take a monster's life and level up.

I murdered a living creature for my own convenience.

I won't forget it. I can't.

The sensation of my sword ripping through skin, slicing through flesh, cutting through bone.

The stench of the spraying blood.

The monster's dying cry.

I burned the moment the creature expired into my mind.

It was a death all too real, much more so than any CG in a game.

In Japan, vermin are sometimes exterminated, too.

Not only that, but the meat lining the shelves once belonged to living cows, pigs, and so on.

People have to take lives in order to go on living.

We humans steal countless lives over the course of our own, even if indirectly.

But I never realized how much heavier it would feel to purposely take a life.

And then I can't help thinking...if this is how bad it feels to kill a monster, how much worse must it feel to kill a human?

It's terrifying.

Just thinking about it scares me.

How was Hugo able to do such a thing?

If he'd been through similar experiences, surely he wouldn't think of this as a dreamlike world.

This world might seem like a game, but it's not.

Even if lives don't seem to be worth as much here, they're just as valuable as they were on Earth.

It's just that people don't realize that here.

I get it.

In this world of endless war, you have no choice but to view your enemies' lives as cheap.

They're killing monsters and demons for the sake of their own lives.

I'm not going to demand that they stop, of course.

I've killed monsters for my own sake, too.

Each life you take is a cross that you have to bear.

I understand trying to ease the load a little by viewing lives so lightly.

But that doesn't mean I'm willing to change my own views so drastically just to go with the flow.

Because I once knew a hero who chased his ideals until the moment of his death, even knowing they were impossible to achieve.

"I know I'm just dreaming. I don't care if people laugh at me for being unrealistic. But there's nothing wrong with having a goal to strive for. Mine is a world where everyone can live happily in peace. And I'll keep chasing that ideal until I die."

Julius said that and kept on fighting.

Such a contradiction: fighting for the sake of peace.

He struggled with that but never showed me his suffering as he kept fighting.

I decided I wanted to carry on Julius's ideals.

I'm afraid of fighting.

Afraid of taking lives.

And afraid of having my own life taken.

I can't be a hero who fights with resolve and determination, like Julius was.

Even my goal is just an imitation of what Julius told me.

I'm a sham of a hero, halfhearted and cowardly.

But part of me thinks that maybe there are things I can do *because* of the way I am.

Like maybe knowing the true value of a life is the first step.

Maybe my values from being born and raised in a peaceful country like Japan could be of some use in this world.

Even if I can't put an end to all wars, I might at least be able to end some of the fighting.

I'm not qualified to be a hero, but I still want to find a way to be of use.

I want to do everything I can, for all that I'm worth.

I believed that before Natsume chased me out of the kingdom, and I kept on sticking to it even after that, taking on any task set before me.

So when I heard the truth of this world being told to me as if in ridicule of my

beliefs and Julius's dreams, I got overly emotional.

I realized I'd misspoken as soon as I saw Kyouya's face.

He looked like he was holding back some painful feelings of his own.

When I saw that expression and realized that Kyouya hadn't really wanted to kill the elves, either, a part of me was relieved.

But that wasn't enough to calm the storm of emotions in my heart, nor could I bring myself to accuse him any further. So I just kept gazing into Kyouya's face.

"...I'm sorry. I got a little worked up and said too much."

After a while, I finally calmed down enough to apologize to my old friend.

For whatever reason, I had a feeling it was wrong to blame Kyouya for all this.

"No, you don't need to be sorry. You're right, Shun." Kyouya shook his head softly. "I'm envious of your ability to stick to what's right."

Suddenly, I found it hard to believe that this fragile, exhausted expression belonged to the same person who had mercilessly slaughtered the elves.

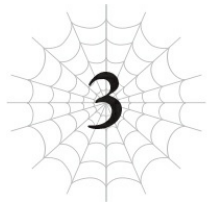
That face told me that Kyouya had been through a lot and had his own reasons, too.

After showing me such weakness for only a moment, Kyouya closed his eyes. When he opened them again, the fire had returned to his gaze.

"You're right. But I'm not going to change my ways now. Nor am I going to regret what I've done."

In those eyes, I saw the conviction of a man who would never back down from his belief.

Beliefs that could never be reconciled with my own...



IF YOU'RE NOT STRONG ENOUGH, YOU'D BETTER GET GROVELING

"Hey, sorry. I know you're having a super serious conversation, but..."

The crackling tension in the air gets interrupted by someone we all totally forgot about: Kusama.

Still tied up face-to-face with Ogiwara in a truly ridiculous position, he gets a deadly serious glint in his eye as he goes on.

"I'm about to piss my pants. Can I go to the bathroom?"

The change in Ogiwara's expression is immediate and hilarious.

It goes from an unimpressed *c'mon dude, read the room* to a horrified *are you serious?!*

Yeah, I can't blame him since he's tied to the guy and all.

If Kusama actually pees himself, it's gonna be a bad time for someone who's practically glued up against him.

I'd probably make the same face in his position.

"I don't see why not, hmm? It seems like some of us need to cool off anyway. This might be a good time for a break."

Before I can say anything, Vampy takes it upon herself to announce an intermission.

On top of that, even as she says it, she's already getting up, stretching, and flouncing out the door.

Man. She wasn't exactly making an effort to conceal her disinterest, but I guess she was even more bored than I thought.

"I'm gonna go pee, then!"

Kusama hops up with a yell and disappears.

He's suddenly nowhere to be seen, as if he was never tied up at all.

Oh, neat.

That was actually kinda ninja-like.

I guess he could've escaped whenever he wanted to, then.

Since he chose to wait and ask for permission, maybe he was reading the room after all?

In fact, maybe he picked that particular time to announce his needs on purpose, in order to break the tension?

...Yeah, no waaay.

That's giving Kusama waaay too much credit.

I'm sure his bladder just reached capacity at the exact right moment.

There's always that one guy who asks to go to the bathroom at the most critical junctures.

Y'know, like during a test.

Once Vampy and Kusama take off, the rest of the reincarnations stand around for a moment like they don't know what to do.

But then Mr. Oni silently closes his eyes, and Yamada responds by letting out a big breath as if to release some tension.

That prompts everyone else to start taking their own actions.

Some start chatting with the people next to them, while others go up the stairs.

Ah! Speaking of upstairs, that's where Ms. Oka is resting!

I'm gonna go see how she's doing.

Is it really okay for me to leave when I'm the facilitator or whatever, you ask?

Well, I'm pretty beat after all that drama. I'm sure they'll figure it out with or without me.

If anything, I feel like it doesn't even matter if I'm there at this point.

I stand up from my chair and start walking toward the stairs.

Kinda feels like everyone who's still in the room is hard-core staring after me, but let's just pretend that's my imagination.

Kudo and Shinohara in particular seem to be glaring holes into the back of my head, but that's not my problem!

"If you're going to go see Ms. Oka, do you mind if I come along?"

Here I am, trying to walk along a bed of nails with nerves of steel, yet one particular hero has to go and ruin the whole thing for me.

Well, yeah, I guess Yamada's got the heart of a hero and all that crap.

Besides, he doesn't really need my permission, not to mention that he's already standing up to follow me, even though he phrased it as a question.

It's all too much of a pain to deal with, so I just nod silently and keep walking, without paying him any more mind.

Behind him, Ooshima follows, as if there's nothing better to do.

And even farther behind them, Shinohara silently trails along, too.

I always thought of Shinohara as rather chatty, but she hasn't said a word so far.

Yet there's something intense about her silent stare.

It's almost extra scary because of the contrast with her normally noisy self.

We all climb the stairs in silence, me included, and arrive at the room in question.

I knock on the door to be polite, then wait for a response.

But the door opens from within without anyone saying a word.

It's Kushitani, who's been keeping an eye on Ms. Oka.

"Come in. Quietly, though—she's still sleeping."

She must have noticed we were coming with her heightened senses as a former adventurer.

Ever since the meeting started, I've been thinking that Kushitani and Tagawa seem to understand things better than most because they've experienced life in both the outside world and the elf village.

And with their experience as independent adventurers, they're better at

making decisions than the other reincarnations are.

Kushitani was kind enough to prioritize looking after Ms. Oka earlier, too.

In that way, they're different from Yamada and the others, who lived in the outside world but had a more sheltered upbringing.

When I walk into the room at Kushitani's prompting, I see Ms. Oka lying in a bed.

She was still conscious when Kushitani carried her out earlier, but she must have passed out from the stress or something.

Aside from the bed where Ms. Oka is sleeping, there's one more in the room. This one contains Hasebe.

Phelmina, who's been keeping watch over her, is sitting next to it silently.

...Her eyes look kinda cold when she sees me.

I'm sure it's just my imagination!

I've been noticing all kinds of dirty looks today, but I swear they're all just figments of my imagination!

At least, that's what I have to keep telling myself!

Got that?!

"How is Ms. Oka's health?" Yamada asks Kushitani.

"It's hard to say. It's her heart that's hurting, not her body, after all. She's sleeping off the exhaustion right now, but there's no telling how she'll feel when she wakes up."

With that, Kushitani shrugs.

Her wording and tone might seem a little indifferent, but I'm sure she's worried about Ms. Oka in her own way.

"And how'd that go?"

Kushitani looks at me, not Yamada, as she asks this question.

She's probably questioning what happened downstairs, since we showed up awfully soon to have finished discussing everything already.

“We’re taking a break. I’m afraid I derailed things a little.”

Yamada gives a sheepish smile.

So he knows he threw things off track, huh?

“Well, I can’t say I blame you. In this situation, we’ve got so many questions, it’s hard to know what to ask first.”

Kushitani gives a little sigh and glances in my direction.

I guess she’s a little concerned about what our side is going to do next, too.

So even experienced former adventurers get a little uneasy when they don’t know what’s coming, huh?

“There is one thing I’d like to ask right away, though.” Kushitani steels herself. “What do you plan to do with us after this, Miss Wakaba?”

Hmm.

It clearly took a lot of courage to ask that, but I’ve only got one answer...

“Nothing, really.”

“Excuse me?”

Even someone as levelheaded as Kushitani looks confused and unconvinced by my answer.

“Nothing really...?”

She looks halfway to her wit’s end. What am I supposed to say, though?

I mean, that really is all there is to it.

Our biggest reason for attacking and destroying the elf village was to take down Potimas.

The next-biggest reason was to free Ms. Oka from his grasp; rescuing the captured reincarnations comes in a distant third.

Frankly, rescuing these guys was only an afterthought to beating Potimas.

So I haven’t really thought about what happens to the reincarnations after this.

I think they should be free to do whatever they want, to be honest.

Although it would be kinda cold to just say, “You guys are free now. Take care of yourselves” and dump them somewhere. I’ll give them a little bit of support, at least.

But I mean, c’mon. They’re all grown-ass adults, especially if you count their previous lives. As long as they’re set up with the basics, I’m sure they can take care of themselves.

Even if I can’t help but feel like they haven’t matured all that much, probably because they were so sheltered in here.

Anyway, I should explain all that to them, but that sounds like a huge pain.

Read my lips: I don’t wanna talk anymore!

“I’ll explain things properly downstairs, all that included. Kushitani, you can have Tagawa fill you in later, if you don’t mind.”

If I explain it now, I’ll just have to go over it again with everybody else.

I don’t even wanna do it once, never mind twice.

Now that I’ve checked in on Ms. Oka, there’s no point making any more of a fuss while she’s trying to sleep.

So I’m just making a strategic retreat.

I’m definitely not fleeing with my tail between my legs.

I’m not, okay? I swear.

As Kushitani, Yamada, and the others stare at me in shock, I quickly about-face and exit the room.

It feels like Shinohara was glaring daggers at me, but I’m just imagining things again, I’m sure!

When I get back downstairs, it’s immediately clear that the almost-settled atmosphere has gotten super tense again.

As soon as I show up, everyone’s eyes fix right on me.

Oof.

So my existence is really that stressful to all of you, huh? Got it.

Kusama is not back yet, and a few others are still missing as well, so that means we're still on break, right?

Okay, I'm gonna peace out from this sea of eyes, then!

Ogiwara appears to be kneeling on the floor for some reason, but I'll pretend I didn't see anything.

Ignoring all the piercing stares, I make for the door that leads outside.

Phew.

Why's it feel like I'm standing on a bed of needles in there? Sooo uncomfortable!

Are we sure I can't just leave and never come back?

I can't, huh?

Riiight...

Once this break is over, I'm gonna have to start explaining things again, but my best interpreter doesn't seem like he's in a good way at the moment.

I might not be able to count on Mr. Oni for backup very much.

In that case, I'll need backup from someone else, which unfortunately only leaves one option...

But the option in question, aka Vampy, appears to have summoned a black wolf to recline against and is currently basking in the sun.

Uh, Vampy?

You sure about that?

Aren't you supposed to be a vampire?

'Cause it kinda feels like sunning yourself on purpose is basically making a mockery of every other vampire in existence.

It would probably be a sweet scene if it was anyone else, but she's a vampire, sooo...

"...Can I help you?"

Um, yeah, actually.

By apologizing to every vampire who lives in fear of the sun!

“Gorgeous weather, isn’t it? I could fall asleep right here if it weren’t for that god-awful stench.”

Apologize!

Apologize to all the vampires!

It *is* pretty nice weather, though.

The sun is shining like you wouldn’t believe.

Also, the black wolf Vampy is leaning on looks like a super-soft, fluffy cushion.

If it weren’t for the smell from the burnt wasteland around us, I suppose it really would be a nice day for a nap.

As all this crosses my mind, Vampy actually has the gall to close her eyes and start dozing off.

That kinda pisses me off, so I lightly kick her in the side.

“Ow!”

She glares up at me as if to ask what my problem is, but I couldn’t help it! That was an act of divine punishment!

It’s all your fault, Vampy!

“What? I’m not allowed to sleep?”

Hell no, you’re not!

“Why shouldn’t I? It’s not as if I need to be there for that little party. If my presence isn’t required, I don’t see why I can’t just leave.”

She certainly wasn’t contributing before, but now that Mr. Oni seems too preoccupied to help me, I’m gonna need her to step up.

I have to convince her to explain things for me somehow!

...Can she really even do that, though?

I’m kinda concerned about entrusting her with that job...

“I was so bored that I got sleepy. What else am I supposed to do?”

With that, Vampy gives a cute little yawn.

Her languid pose comes off as weirdly erotic.

Honestly.

Who’s this little act even for?

Want me to do something about that scandalous chest of yours?

I mean, um, forget it.

The image of the Demon Lord making grabby hands with a wicked grin on her face suddenly crosses my mind, and I hastily put all chest-related thoughts aside.

I think the Demon Lord has a bit of a complex about her figure...

“When it comes right down to it, why should you have to explain things to those people anyway, Master? That stupid hero was babbling on about having a right to know, but does he really? As far as I’m concerned, we’re just educating them as a kindness. We’re under no obligation to tell them anything, so why even bother?”

Uhh, yikes.

I guess Vampy was even more stressed about this whole meeting thing than I thought.

But I do kinda get where she’s coming from.

Vampy’s totally moved on from her old life.

She feels strongly that this life has nothing to do with the previous one, so she probably only thinks of the other reincarnations as acquaintances she vaguely knew a long time ago.

Maybe not even acquaintances, in fact.

So she doesn’t think we’re obligated to be nice to them.

And honestly, she’s not wrong.

We really don’t have an obligation to explain anything at all to the

reincarnations.

It's just, they *are* technically victims, which makes me feel a little bad casting them aside without a word of explanation. That's the only reason I'm trying to explain what's going on.

Like Vampy says, Yamada's so-called *right to know* is really just a matter of opinion, huh...?

"In fact, I can't wrap my head around why you're being nice enough to explain anything to them, Master. It doesn't make any sense. Especially when you're so bad at explanations."

Hey, that last sentence was uncalled for!

It might be the truth, but that doesn't mean you can just come right out and say it, jerk!

"Not to mention that you're cold-blooded and cruel without a shred of emotion."

Okay, now you're just doing this on purpose.

You wanna take this outside, Vampy?

Looks like we still need to reach an understanding, you and me.

"Oh, all right. I'll do it, Master. I'll take over the explanation for you."

Just as I'm about to drag Vampy into my web for a little "chat," she says something unexpected.

Wait... What...?!

You're telling me *Vampy* is actually being considerate?!

"Why do you look so surprised? What kind of person do you think I am, Master?"

A no-good vampire.

Apparently, Vampy can tell what I'm thinking; she scowls as she stands. The black wolf she was reclining on vanishes as if swallowed up into her shadow.

"Hmph. I'm sure this farce will only get dragged out even longer if I leave you

to take care of it alone. And Kyouya seems too distracted to fend off questions right now. The only way to deal with such a boring task is to finish it up as quickly as possible.”

With that, Vampy strides toward the tree house where the reincarnations are waiting.

Who is this capable woman, and what has she done with the real Vampy?

“What are you waiting for? Let’s get this over with already.”

Vampy turns around at the door and calls to me impatiently.

Feeling like I’ve stumbled into the Twilight Zone, I stumble after her in a daze.

When we reenter the tree house, Kusama and Ogiwara are bound together again.

Just like before, they’re tied up face-to-face, like they’re in a lovers’ embrace.

I’m pretty sure Ogiwara was kneeling on the floor by himself when I left a few minutes ago. How’d he get literally roped in with Kusama again?

...Okay, yeah.

I’m not even gonna question it.

Vampy is totally ignoring them, too.

She walks right over to the area where we were sitting before.

But instead of sitting down, she just stands there with her arms folded.

It feels like she’s expecting me to sit, though, so I go ahead and do so.

“All right, let’s get this ball rolling again. Is anyone missing? No? If you notice anyone absent, somebody go get them, please.”

Vampy claps her hands briskly and raises her voice so the whole room can hear.

Impressively enough, even though she’s speaking fairly loudly, she doesn’t sound any less elegant than usual.

Huh?

Has she always been this impressive?

As soon as she starts speaking, the reincarnations who were chatting among themselves settle down into silence.

At the same time, Kudo stands and goes up the stairs.

I assume she's going to get Yamada and the others who haven't come back yet.

Watching her leave, Vampy folds her arms again and stands in silent anticipation.

Mr. Oni stares at her dubiously.

Yeah.

I can't say I blame him.

Vampy never puts herself out on a limb like this.

And when she does take the initiative, it usually means something terrible is about to happen.

Mr. Oni sends a few questioning glances in my direction.

I'm as confused as you are, buddy!

Before long, Kudo returns with Yamada and company in tow.

They each return to their seats.

"Let's start this up again, then."

There's a different kind of tension in the air now that Vampy's running things.

Before, it was like everyone was afraid of the uncertain future and the mysterious people addressing them, but now it's more like they're just intimidated by Vampy.

...Huh?

Were they more scared of me than they are of her?

I don't get it.

"First of all, just so we're clear: We saved all you people, which means it's officially up to us whether you live or die. Get that through your heads."

Um...*hello*?!

Way to come out swinging, Vampy...!

“Wait a minute!”

“Shut up. I’m still talking.”

Yamada stands up to protest, but Vampy silences him.

Physically, that is.

“Gah!”

I imagine Mr. Oni and I are the only ones who understand what just happened.

Even the reincarnations who are decent in battle, like Ooshima and Tagawa, probably couldn’t follow Vampy’s movements.

All she actually did was get close to Yamada and sweep his legs out from under him.

It’s just that she did it with unbelievable speed and strength.

Yamada goes flying out of his chair.

She must have held back a little bit, or Yamada’s legs would probably be broken—in fact, his entire lower half might have been blown right off.

“Listen, we’re telling you all this out of the goodness of our hearts, as a courtesy. Do you understand me? We’re doing you a *favor*.”

As Yamada groans in pain on the floor, Vampy spells things out to him like she’s talking to a child.

“Frankly, we only rescued you all as an afterthought to wiping out the elves. I, for one, would be more than happy to let you all go without another word of explanation. But out of respect for our shared past lives, we’re generously explaining things to you like this. Isn’t that nice?”

I don’t think “nice” people usually sweep other people’s legs out from under them without warning.

For that matter, they probably don’t make threatening statements about

holding people's lives in their hands, either.

"Hey..."

"You be quiet, too, Kyouya. It's your fault we got so far off track. Do *try* not to make an even bigger mess of things, won't you?"

Vampy cuts Mr. Oni off before he can offer any constructive criticism.

Too bad she's making the biggest mess of all!

"You think you have a right to know, hmm? Well, let me be the first to tell you, you've got no such thing. You people are essentially prisoners of war right now. Not to mention, refugees without a home. Which means we can kill you or let you live on a whim. Have I made myself clear?"

While Vampy smiles brightly, the other reincarnations' expressions are rapidly darkening.

Up until a few moments ago, the vibe was basically like a class assembly, but now words like "prisoners" and "kill" have clearly made them realize that the situation is more dangerous than they thought.

Cool, cool.

Although you could've told them a little more gently!

What are we gonna do about this icy atmosphere?!

"You don't need to say it so..."

"I told you to shut up."

As Yamada tries to speak up again, Vampy mercilessly kicks him in the face.

"Stop it!"

"And as I said, I'm still talking!"

When Ooshima moves to stop her, Vampy sends her to the floor with a slap.

What a thing to do to a lady's face!

...Ooshima *is* a lady now, right? You know what? Let's not worry about that right now.

"If you've got a problem, the door is right over there. We're under no

obligation to explain anything to you, mind. So if you don't want to hear it, you certainly don't have to. But if you want to know, shut up and listen. Every second you all open your mouths is another second wasted."

A hush falls over the room at that.

Yamada quietly scoots over next to Ooshima and uses Healing Magic on the area where she was slapped, but no one moves a muscle otherwise.

It's almost like they're all holding their breath.

"Good. Now, keep quiet and listen. I won't be taking questions at this time. Once I've explained everything, I'll allow for questions at the end, if I so choose. Until then, just listen to me in silence. Understood?"

No one raises any objections.

She's totally ruling with an iron fist here!

Sure, that might be the most effective way to explain something to a bunch of people, but isn't that going to leave a downright awful impression afterward? Geez.

What am I supposed to do about this?

Not my problem, I guess.

"Now, what have we covered so far? Let me think..."

Vampy taps her finger on her chin and gets utterly lost in thought.

Wow.

She wasn't even remotely listening earlier!

Everything I said went in one ear and out the other, like a principal's rambling speech at a school assembly.

"Oh, well. It doesn't matter."

YES IT DOES!

"Let's just skip the part about the current state of the world. Honestly, what's the point in telling you that this planet is on the verge of destruction when it'll only upset you? It's not as if you can do anything about it whether you know or

not. I can't be bothered to explain. If you really must know more, you can come ask me about it later."

Sheesh, tell us how you really feel.

I guess she does have a point, though.

The majority of these reincarnations would be no use in battle.

You can't really ask a bunch of normies to try and save the world from total annihilation.

This isn't one of those movies where some random person gets sent into space to put a hole through a giant meteorite that's about to crash into the planet or whatever.

"At any rate, this planet won't be destroyed in any of your lifetimes. So there's no point dwelling on it, is there? I'm sure you're more concerned about your immediate future than about something that won't happen until after you die. Am I wrong?"

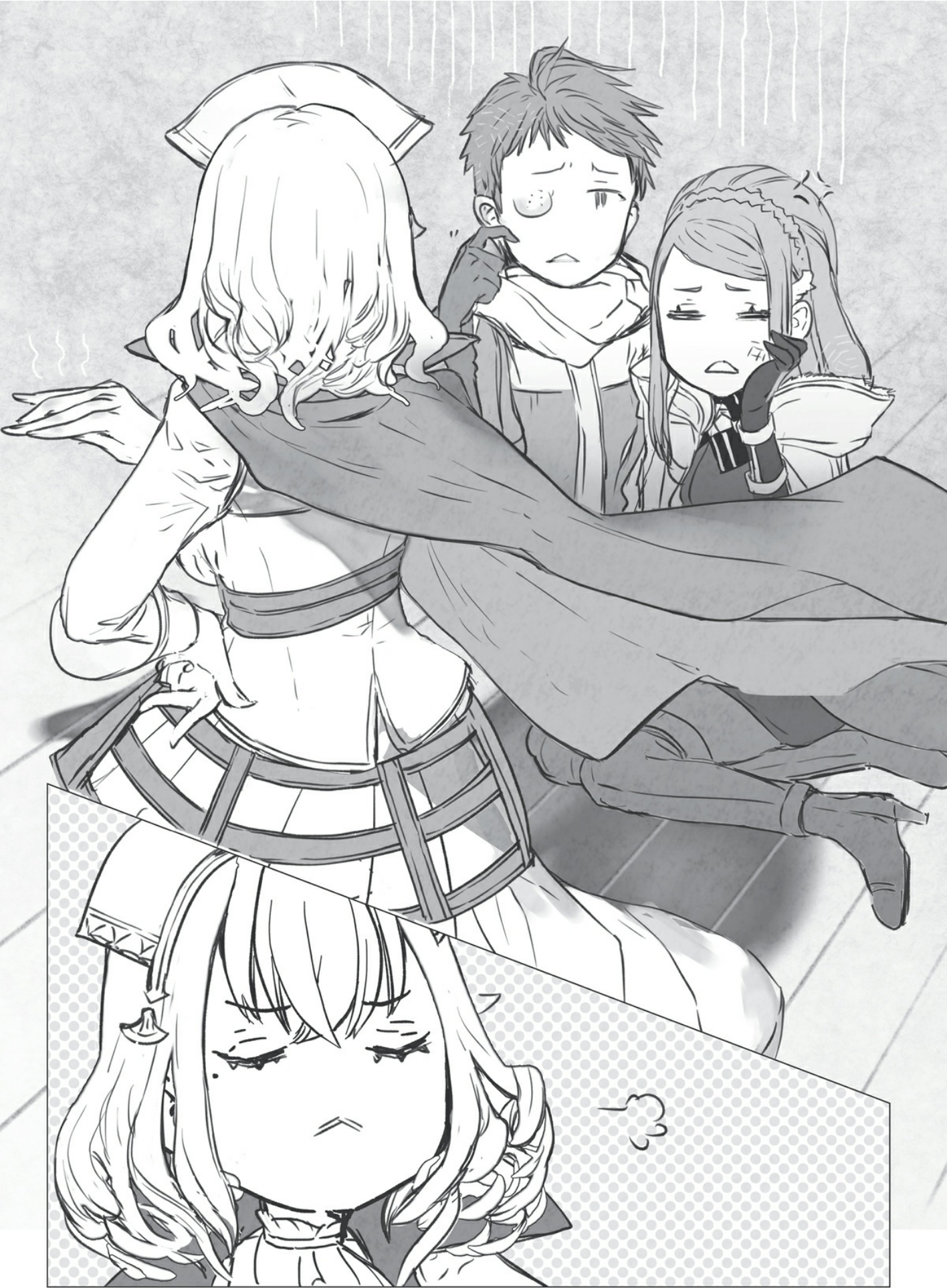
Vampy looks around at the reincarnations.

After she just knocked down Yamada and Ooshima, nobody is about to risk speaking up and attracting her attention.

But a few of them are at least implying agreement with their posture and attitude: nodding along, looking at her seriously, and so on.

"As I said before, we personally brought down the elf village. So you'd better be aware that you're essentially prisoners of war. But it's not as if we're enemies, so we don't intend to harm you...as long as you're on your best behavior, that is."

I'm pretty sure I heard a few of the reincarnations audibly gulp.



I mean, yeah.

You can't really claim you don't mean any harm right after smacking several people around.

Nobody's gonna believe that after seeing what they all saw.

I can't blame them for assuming that this means they'll be beaten to a pulp if they don't fall into line.

In fact, maybe that's exactly what she wants them to think?

Hmm.

I'm not sure if Vampy is actually thinking it through that deeply or not.

It's entirely possible that she's just blurting out whatever comes to mind without a second thought.

This is Vampy we're talking about, y'know?

"Now then, as for what happens to you all from here on out, we're happy to go along with whatever you choose. We'll look after you if you want protection, and you're free to leave, if that's what you'd prefer. If you want to stay here, that's fine, too. Although I can't say I recommend it, since the barrier's gone and we slaughtered all the elves and all."

Great, another bombshell!

A shudder runs through the crowd.

They'd probably be yelling at us if Vampy hadn't just ordered them to stay quiet, I bet.

In fact, I'm impressed that her threat worked well enough to stop them.

The reincarnations are all clearly shaken after learning that the elves have been massacred.

I mean, can you blame them? These people were walking around and talking to them just yesterday, and now they've just learned that they're all dead.

From the way we've been talking so far, I'm sure they'd figured out that the elves fought us and lost, but I doubt they reached the conclusion that we'd

killed *every last one of them*.

On top of that, most of these reincarnations have been living in an extended edition of their peaceful lives in Japan and have never seen a battlefield in all their days.

That just makes the shock even more intense.

Some of them are turning pale, while others try to laugh it off in disbelief, but fail.

“Hey.”

Unable to sit idly by in all this panic, Mr. Oni tugs on Vampy’s arm.

“What?”

“Did you really need to mention that?”

“If not now, then when? They would’ve found out sooner or later, even if we tried to hide it. Isn’t it better to rip the bandage off?”

Vampy shakes her arm free of Mr. Oni’s grasp.

He doesn’t pursue the argument after that; more like he can’t.

Hmm.

It’s true: Even though the reincarnations are totally freaking out, we were gonna have to tell them eventually.

As shocking as it might be for them to hear, it wouldn’t have been good to drag it out indefinitely without fessing up, either...

Maybe Vampy’s actually right that it’s better just to get it out of the way.

“So...it’s true...?” Yamada whispers faintly.

Evidently, he figured out from Vampy and Mr. Oni’s exchange that her announcement was no joke.

“It is. Ah, but don’t say another word, all right? I don’t need to hear your silly little opinions. No matter what you might want to say to us, I have no desire to listen. If you still insist upon saying it, I suppose you’ll have to silence me by force. Not that you’d be able to do that.”

Daaamn!

That's harsh!

Like, really harsh!

Yamada's even gritting his teeth like he wants to cry!

I think you could've sugar-coated it a *little* more than that.

"What's done is done, no matter how much you whine about it. How annoying can you be? If you had a problem with it, you should've stopped us. Don't blame us for your own weakness, okay?"

Daaamn!

That's harsh!

Really, really harsh!

Forget sugar-coating it, she's out here rubbing salt in the wound!

Yamada is clenching his fists and trembling now!

Poor guy.

"At any rate, the elves are gone, regardless of how it happened. That's all you need to know. And the only thing you need to worry about now is what to make of your lives from here on out. Forget about your lives here, or any misplaced sense of responsibility or justice. We don't care about any of that. Deal with it among yourselves."

With that, Vampy turns away from Yamada, as if he's not even worth looking at anymore.

"There's no one else left in this village. On top of that, the barrier that kept this place safe is gone, too, meaning monsters can come and go whenever they please. If any of you are so attached to this wreck of a place that you want to stay in spite of all that, we'll respect your wishes. Anyone?"

A few reincarnations shake their heads rapidly.

I mean, yeah.

"Well, if you don't want to stay, we'll escort you safely out of the village—or

rather, the forest. After that, as I said before, you can each tell us what you'd like to do next. We'll do our best to make it happen, out of the goodness of our hearts. Though only if it's within reason, of course."

Mm-hmm.

I think we can at least get them set up with their basic needs.

But if any of them say they want to live in the lap of luxury, I'll knock them out cold.

As long as they don't make any unreasonable demands, though, I would like to hear them out.

It shouldn't be too hard with the help of the Word of God church.

"Oh, right. If you really want to, why don't you just go back to Earth?"

Hmm?

What?

"We can go back?!"

Kudo, who's been making an effort to keep quiet this whole time, blurts out a cry and leaps from her seat.

"You can do that, right?"

Vampy turns toward me for confirmation.

Huh?

Uh...

Not really, no?

But as much as I want to say that, the hopeful eyes of the reincarnations are boring into me.

Vampyyyyy...

Way to make an even bigger mess!

Thanks to the giant bombshell Vampy just threw into the mix, the reincarnations are all chattering away.

They're so worked up that even Vampy's threat isn't working.

I guess the idea that they might be able to go back to Earth is really that shocking.

But unfortunately, I can't do that.

It's true that I did ask Vampy before if she wanted to go back to Earth.

But I meant after this is all over.

After the system is destroyed.

Not right now, while it's still in place.

As it stands, the reincarnations can't go back to Earth.

Why? Because of the "n% I = W" skill.

Though it was a mystery at first, what this skill actually does is link the reincarnations to this world's system.

The reincarnations aren't originally from this planet, after all.

When they died, they were supposed to go back into the normal cycle of death and rebirth, not the bizarre effect of this particular planet's system.

Instead, they were forcibly shoved into this system to begin their second lives.

That's the nature of the reincarnations.

And what keeps their souls attached to this system is the "n% I = W" skill.

Because of this skill, the reincarnations are able to receive the boons of the system like skills and stats, even though they're outsiders.

At the same time, it also prevents them from being completely absorbed into the system.

Unlike the people of this planet, if the reincarnations die, they'll go back into the regular cycle of death and rebirth.

Otherwise, if they become a part of this system completely, they'd get trapped in the endless hell of being reborn on this planet over and over.

Thus, the "n% I = W" skill gives the reincarnations the benefits of the system while preventing them from getting absorbed into the system completely.

Ultimately, as far as the system is concerned, the reincarnations are just temporary visitors.

So yeah, the “n% I = W” skill is super important for reincarnations, but in this particular case it works against them.

Skills are attached to one’s soul.

And since the “n% I = W” skill is especially necessary to reincarnations, it’s locked into their souls nice and tight.

And again, this skill is a bridge linking the reincarnations to the system.

Which means it’s connected to the system directly.

It’s impossible to sever that connection.

And *that* means I can’t take the reincarnations away from this planet where the system is in place.

Once the system is destroyed, that bond will be broken.

That’s why I asked Vampy and Mr. Oni if they’d want to go back to Earth once it’s all over.

But apparently Vampy interpreted that very differently and assumed I meant they could go back anytime.

Truth be told, since I’m no longer under the effect of skills, I can travel to and from Earth as I please.

But that’s only because I don’t have skills anymore. The only way to take the reincarnations with me would be to either destroy the system or have them get rid of all their skills, like I did.

Now, there is technically a skill that can erase all your skills—a way to offer up their power as a sacrifice.

But even when Ms. Oka used that method to erase Natsume’s skills, the “n% I = W” skill remained.

That’s how important the “n% I = W” skill is, and how difficult it would be to cut it off.

I mean, it’s basically a terminal for relaying the system’s effects, so it makes

sense that you wouldn't be able to delete it within that system's abilities.

Which means the only way to cut it off would be to become a god like me.

What kind of nightmare difficulty is that?

No waaay.

Then is there any way I can use my powers to get rid of "n% I = W," you ask?
Nooo waaay.

You know D is the one that made it, right?

It would be impossible for the likes of me to do anything about it.

Stuff that's related to souls requires some ridiculously high-level techniques.

A newbie who's only been a god for a few years wouldn't be able to touch that sort of thing.

I'd be too scared to even try, in case I accidentally destroyed the whole soul, you know?

So in conclusion, no, they can't go back.

But, uh, how am I supposed to explain that to them?

Well, I guess it's not like I need to get into the nitty-gritty details. In theory, I could just say "nope" and leave it at that.

But Kudo and several of the others are staring at me with so much hope in their eyes.

Do I really have to shut them down right now?

"Can we really...go back...?"

Kudo's eyes fill with tears.

Um...

Yikes.

Right, I guess if you still had attachments to Earth, you'd want to go back.

Especially in the case of these guys, who were under house arrest in the elf village for most of their lives. I'm sure the painful experiences made their

homesickness that much stronger.

But think of how I feel, having to deny them now!

Dammit!

Curse you, Vampy!

You made this even harder than it needed to be!

The first people to notice my hesitation are Vampy and Mr. Oni.

Vampy tilts her head in a look of confusion, while Mr. Oni's eyes widen as he figures things out from my demeanor.

Looks like both of them have figured out from my reaction that it's not possible.

And from there, the rest of the reincarnations begin to notice that all three of us are acting strange.

Their surprise and hope at the thought of going back starts turning to unease.

Kudo, who showed the most excitement of anyone, fixes her eyes on me desperately.

Oof.

Great, thanks a lot, Vampy.

If she hadn't given them hope that they might be able to go back, it probably never would've even occurred to them.

Without hope, there is no disappointment.

But when you get their hopes up, it's that much more disappointing when they find out it's not true.

I steel myself and tell them.

"No. It's not possible."

Immediately, an indescribable mood fills the room.

Vampy opens her mouth to say something else, but I use my Evil Eye to forcibly silence her.

I'm sure she was going to run her mouth to the effect of "What? But you said we could go back before!" or something like that, which is the last thing I need right now.

It's true, once the system is destroyed, it might be possible to go back.

But I have no intention of looking after them until then.

My agreement with D doesn't go that far.

Besides, once the system is broken, I don't know for sure if I'll still be able to do that.

I only suggested it to Vampy and Mr. Oni because I thought I might be able to make it work for those two if I made some preparations in advance.

But I don't have the time or the energy to do that for all the reincarnations.

At most, it would be two, maybe three people.

What would happen if I came out and told them all that?

No doubt they'd start fighting among themselves over who gets to go.

If I can't send them all back, it's better to leave them all here.

At the very least, that means there won't be any fighting over spots or resenting each other.

A painful silence falls.

In its midst, Kudo sits in her chair with a thud.

Or maybe it would be more accurate to say she collapsed, and there just happened to be a chair there.

She looks like the life's been drained from her completely.

Without another word, she hangs her head.

There are a few other faces who can't completely hide their disappointment, too.

I'm sorry.

I didn't mean to give you false hope.

Even Vampy looks uncomfortable, like maybe she feels bad for what she's done.

Seeing that, I release the Evil Eye I'd placed on Vampy.

"Let's wrap things up here for today."

With that, I stand.

It doesn't feel right to go on with the explanatory meeting at the moment.

The reincarnations probably need a little more time to think.

I quickly walk toward the door, as if to escape the chilly atmosphere in the room.

Vampy and Mr. Oni hurriedly follow behind me.

Not one person tries to stop us from leaving, and we exit the tree house unhindered.

The door closes behind us, dividing us from the reincarnations.

SHINOBU KUSAMA

His given name in this life is Sajin, but the reincarnations all call him by his old name of Shinobu Kusama, so few people are aware of that one. He was reincarnated as the son of an intelligence operative for the Word of God religion. As such, he made contact with the pontiff at an early age, which is how the pontiff learned of the existence of reincarnations. He soon became an agent himself, working for the pontiff. His unique skill is "Ninja." Considering his personality, he's often considered the least stealthy ninja of all time, but he is still among the most talented of the intelligence operatives. Incidentally, it's said that D couldn't decide until the last minute whether to give him this unique skill or one that creates grass ("kusa").



Shinobu
Kusama
Collection



THERE'S NO POINT DWELLING ON PAST MISFORTUNES

Once Wakaba and the others leave, the mood in the room is nothing short of dismal.

Kudo, who I imagine would usually be the one to rally the troops, has been slumped in her chair ever since Wakaba said we can't go back to Earth.

I don't know what life was like in the elf village, but the impression I've gotten so far is that they were probably just barely getting by here, with Kudo as their de facto leader.

And now, their leader's heart is broken.

In an already uncertain and frightening situation, seeing the person they normally rely on in a state of despair is probably weighing on them even more heavily.

"I want to go back to Japan."

I'm sure every last reincarnation has had that thought at least once.

I know I've thought it plenty of times.

The civilization in this world is far less developed than in modern Japan, enough so that it often feels inconvenient.

Most of all, I want to see my family again, who I was separated from by my own death.

So the thought inevitably follows.

"I wish I could go back to Japan..."

I was born into the privileged life of a prince of a major kingdom, and even I had that thought.

I'm sure the others who were less lucky felt that way even more strongly.

One look at Kudo is enough to tell me that much.

She and the others were imprisoned here in the elf village, a life without any

freedom.

I guess it's only natural that they would all want to go back to Japan.

"Shino..."

Fei breaks the silence, calling out to Kusama in a low voice.

I'd forgotten that she used to call him "Shino" and often sent him running errands for her.

But back then it was a somewhat fond nickname, while now it sounds almost threatening.

"Wh-what is it?"

"Is there *really* no way to go back to Japan?"

At that, Kudo looks up as if snapping back to reality.

"Those three were acting rather odd back there, don't you think? They must be hiding something, right? And if there was really no possible way to go back, I bet they never would've mentioned it in the first place."

At Fei's confident declaration, all eyes in the room fall on Kusama.

Kusama wriggles nervously under all their accusatory glares, eliciting a scowl from Ogi, who's still tied up with him.

"I don't know! I don't know anything! I swear! Promise! Cross my heart and hope to die!"

Judging by his frantic face, I think he's telling the truth.

But Kudo rushes over to him as if unable to give up on that sliver of hope, grabbing his shoulders and shaking him.

"Please, if you know anything, you have to tell us! I'm begging you!"

"I told you, I don't know anything! If we could go back, I'd wanna go back and read the next volumes of my comics, too!"

That seems like a stupid reason for wanting to go back to Japan, but his tone is earnest.

Although I think he's more upset about the pressure Kudo is putting on him

than missing out on his comics.

“Calm down, class rep. Kusama says he doesn’t know anything, okay? Give him some space.”

Tagawa gently pulls Kudo away from Kusama, trying to calm her.

“I’m sure you wouldn’t understand, since you were on the outside! How do you think we felt being trapped in here all our lives while you were out having fun adventures?!”

I never would have expected Kudo to shout something so harsh.

“Scuse me?”

But it looks like she struck a nerve with Tagawa.

“Fun adventures? Like when my family was all murdered, and I kept fighting until I coughed up blood so I could avenge them? You call that *fun*?!”

Oh no!

“Tagawa! Get ahold of yourself!”

I run over to Tagawa and grab his arms, pinning them down from behind.

If I didn’t do something, it looked like he was about to throw a punch at Kudo.

Kusama has also escaped from his bonds again somehow and is standing in front of Kudo to protect her.

“Ah...”

Standing behind him, Kudo is so overwhelmed that she turns pale and falls to her knees.

I think it’s more than just the threat from Tagawa that has her shaken up.

“...Sorry, I lost my cool. I’m fine now. Could you let go?”

Calming his ragged breath, Tagawa seems to let the rage drain out of him and regain his composure.

I decide to trust him and let go of his arms.

After a quick glance at Kudo, Tagawa silently turns on his heel and heads up the stairs, leaving the room.

“I... I’m sorry...”

Kudo murmurs a quiet apology to Tagawa, who’s no longer around to hear it.

She stays slumped on the floor, unable to stand up.

Her body is shaking, and I hear her starting to sob.

The mood in the room gets even heavier.

I do think Kudo was in the wrong.

I didn’t know about Tagawa’s past either, but it was still insensitive to say something like that without any idea of what he’d been fighting through.

It looks like Kudo is not the only one who was shocked by his words; the other boys who mentioned wanting to be an adventurer look uncomfortable, too.

It’s Kudo’s fault for accidentally upsetting Tagawa, even if she didn’t know any better.

But still, I can’t say I’m angry with her.

“There’s no point arguing over who had it better or what might have been...”

Without thinking, I find myself repeating Kyouya’s words from earlier.

At the time, I got angry over what he said next, but maybe he was right about that much.

We’ve all walked different paths in our lives here.

It’s only natural that we’d have different experiences, good and bad.

There’s no point dwelling on our past misfortunes.

No matter what we do, we can’t alter the past.

We have to focus on the future instead.

“Class rep. Remember, we’ve died once already.”

We all died and were reborn into this world.

That past isn’t going to chance.

“We’re dead. All of us here now are different from the people we were in our past lives, even if we brought those memories with us. We’ve been reborn. That

means we've changed."

Our old class rep looks up at me, her face still red from crying.

Her expression looks confused and a little annoyed that I'm suddenly rambling about something we already know.

"Even if we could go back to Japan, we're different people now. We'd have no home to go back to."

That takes her breath away.

I'm sure she understood that idea logically.

She just didn't want to admit it to herself.

Most of us don't look like our former selves at all.

Katia, for instance, is even a different gender.

We're totally different people.

If we went to Japan in these bodies, we'd have nowhere to return to.

We're residents of this world now, not that one.

"Let's think about the future instead. What do you want to do? What can we do?"

Even as I say it, I find myself doubting if there's anything I can do at all.

So far, I haven't been able to do anything.

I don't even know how to carry on in Julius's stead at this point.

What am I supposed to do from now on?

"Hah! Now there's a big hero's speech for ya."

Just as I start to get lost in my own head, someone opens the door and steps inside.

"Hugo..."

It's the same man who led the imperial army to attack the elf village.

"Don't call me by that goddamn name. My name is Natsume Kengo."

Hugo, or rather Natsume, walks in with obvious displeasure on his face and

plops down in the seat Tagawa was occupying before.

“Natsume, what do you think you’re doing here?”

While I hesitate over how to approach him, Fei starts in with open hostility.

“Hey, c’mon, where’s my warm welcome?”

“As if you have any right to that.”

Fei circles behind Natsume as she speaks, probably so that she can take him down immediately if he tries anything funny.

“What’s the big deal? I’m doin’ you all a favor, showin’ up so you can laugh in my face.”

There’s something strange about that statement.

Fei seems as taken aback as I am, looking at him doubtfully.

It’s then that I finally notice that Natsume’s eyes look lackluster and hollow.

I’ve never seen him like this—his eyes were always glinting intensely before.

“Go on, laugh. I got played for a fool, then got my ass beat by *you* of all people. So much for all my stupid swagger, huh?”

Natsume snorts scornfully at himself.

I’m at a loss for words.

He’s completely changed from before.

“...Wow, what happened to you?”

Fei sounds perturbed by Natsume’s attitude adjustment, too.

“...I just don’t give a shit anymore.” He sounds exhausted. “No, I never gave a shit in the first place. Yamada, you were just sayin’ that we already died once, yeah?”

“Right.”

He heard that?

“Well, you’re damn right. We’re all dead men walkin’. But you accepted that and started to live your second life for real. I couldn’t accept it, so I got rotten to

my core. That's all there is to it."

I stare, dumbfounded.

I never thought I'd hear Natsume speak that way about himself.

After all, Natsume was always full of himself and looking down on other people.

Not to mention he was overconfident, always assumed he was in the right, and did whatever he wanted.

How did he end up like this...?

"Hang on, Natsume. Are you trying to say that everything you've done all this time was just because you were in denial, or something?"

"You hit the nail on the head."

Fei, who had a stronger connection with Natsume in our previous lives than I did, expresses her thoughts frankly, while I'm still sitting in confusion.

You're kidding me...right? He was in denial?

Part of me refuses to believe it, while part of me thinks it makes perfect sense. Conflicting emotions swirl in my chest.

The reason I can almost accept it is that Hugo in this life was just too different from the Natsume in our old lives.

The old Natsume was a pretty energetic guy. He could be a little tone-deaf at times, but he wasn't a terrible person.

I was never his biggest fan even then, but I didn't think he was a bad guy—I just found his intense energy to be a little too much.

Honestly, I think my dislike of him was one-sided.

But in this world, Natsume transformed into a tyrant.

Back in Japan, he did have a slight tendency to steamroll over other people's opinions at times, but it wasn't nearly as bad as in this life.

And he definitely wasn't the kind of person who would actually try to kill someone.

When we were reborn, he changed.

I sensed that much even before he attacked me.

So in a way, it makes more sense to assume there was some reason behind that change.

But it's hard to accept that the reason was that he was in denial.

Can you blame me for not entirely believing it?

I mean, he almost killed me.

On top of that, he used his power to brainwash people like Katia, Sue, and Yuri, and killed my father the king to plunge the kingdom into chaos.

The reason we came here in the first place is because we heard that Natsume was going to lead the imperial army in an attack on the elf village.

As it turns out, Natsume was just being used by the demon army, but that doesn't absolve him of all his evil deeds.

And his reason is because he was in despair?

"You've got to be...kidding...!"

My father was killed for a reason that stupid?!

Sue was brainwashed into killing him...

And Yuri was brainwashed to attack the elf village with the imperial army...

Not to mention all the other people he's trampled. Does he realize what he's done?

Does he know how many people have been hurt or worse because of him?!

And we're supposed to accept that his reasoning is that he was "in denial"?!

I almost punch him in a blind rage, but I manage to stop myself just in time when I remember my exchanges with Kyouya and Tagawa.

After I lectured Kyouya and stopped Tagawa from acting out of anger, it seems wrong for me to strike someone now.

Instead, I take a deep breath and let it out along with my fury.

“What, you’re not gonna hit me? What a wuss.”

“...Just to be clear, it’s not that I forgive you. I’ll make sure you pay for all your wrongdoings. But punching you now wouldn’t resolve any of that. It would only make me feel a little better.”

“So what’s the problem? You might as well do it, even just for yourself.”

I guess he really doesn’t care about anything anymore...

The old Natsume never would’ve given someone permission to punch him in a million years.

“Nah. I won’t.”

If I punish him with violence now, I’d be negating everything I said to Kyouya before.

“Heh. Such a damn softy.”

When Natsume smirks at me, I feel an almost murderous rage, but I resist it.

“Fine, then. I’ll do it your way. Gimme whatever kinda punishment you want.”

That might sound noble, but I doubt it means he actually feels bad about what he’s done.

He really just doesn’t care anymore.

Maybe not even whether he lives or dies.

If I said I was going to kill him, I get the feeling he’d go along with it.

“Hey, this is just a hunch, but...were you brainwashed, too, by any chance?”

While I’m glowering at Natsume, Fei suddenly speaks up.

What is she talking about?

Brainwashing is basically Natsume’s specialty, thanks to his Envy skill.

How could he have been brainwashed himself?

I didn’t see any such status conditions when I checked his stats before, either. It doesn’t quite add up.

“It’s just, I saw something weird. During yesterday’s battle, when Wakaba

grabbed your head, something that looked like a tiny spider came out of your ear.”

Hearing that gives me a little shiver.

Even Natsume puts a hand to his ear and looks a little pale.

“Uh, yeah. I think you’re probably right. My ear? Holy shit. I knew something was messing with my head, but it came out of my *ear*...? There was physically something in there? Gross...”

Natsume digs his finger into his ear as he speaks.

I doubt that would be enough to get anything out of there, but it’s probably just an instinctive reaction.

I can’t say I blame him.

If someone told me there was something in my ear, I’d probably try to do the same, even knowing it wouldn’t work.

But if that’s true, does that mean all Natsume’s actions were because he was being controlled by someone else?

In that case...

“Listen, even if I was bein’ controlled, I don’t want your goddamn pity. Got it?”

“No, but...”

“When I tried to off ya that first time, I wasn’t under anyone’s control yet. And even when I was, I still wanted to kill you of my own free will. That’s no lie.”

Hearing that shocks me even more than I expected.

My former classmate really wanted to kill me that badly, whether he was being controlled or not?

“So you’re saying being ‘in denial’ is your entire selfish reason for being such a brute?”

“You got that right.”

“And the fact that you’re here taking responsibility for that now is only

because now that you're not brainwashed, you don't care about anything anymore?"

"Did I stutter?"

"Hmm. I see, I see."

With that, Fei takes Natsume by the shoulders from behind and turns him to face her.

Then...

"Hmph!"

"Nghuh?!"

...she punches him in the gut.

Natsume clutches his stomach and tumbles out of the chair onto the floor.

"Ahh. That's better!"

What was I holding back for, then...?

Fei went ahead and punished him with violence anyway.

"Y-you..."

"Now, now, what's the problem? You said yourself that we could punch you. Just consider this one of your many punishments to come."

After frowning nonstop all this time, Fei gives her brightest smile of the day.

"All right, I've made up my mind. You're going to be our slave until the day you die. No matter what we do to you, you're not allowed to complain. Sound fair?"

"Whoa..."

Is she out of her mind?

"...Yeah, sure."

And he's agreeing to it?!

...Maybe Natsume does actually feel a little guilty about everything he's put us through.

“Are you good with that, too, Yuri?”

“Huh?”

At Fei’s words, I turn around to find Yuri walking in, accompanied by a girl in the white robes of the demon army.

I didn’t even notice her.

Since I didn’t notice Natsume’s approach either, it seems like I’m not being alert enough about my surroundings.

“Oh, um, yes. To be honest, I was rather hoping for something more brutal, but if he’s to experience a fate worse than death every day, over and over... Hee-hee... Ho-ho-ho-ho!”

“Y-Yuri? Are you feeling okay?”

“Yes, of course. Perfectly fine. Why shouldn’t I be?”

Though her lips are curved upward, her smile doesn’t reach her eyes.

“Want to give him a punch for now?”

Fei drags Natsume up from the floor and forces him back into his seat, offering him to Yuri.

“Oh, yes.”

Before the words have even left her mouth, Yuri steps in close to Natsume and hits him hard in the stomach.

“Oogh?!”

Natsume tumbles back to the ground.

This is a fairly tame punishment, considering everything he’s done, but I bet it’s still rough on him both physically and mentally to take a public beating in front of his former classmates.

“You want a turn, Katia?”

“No, I’m all set, thanks...”

Katia shakes her head, looking a little disturbed.

Since she’s also one of Natsume’s brainwashing victims, she has every right to

punish him along with the others.

But I guess she's not in the mood to pile on to this already alarming scene of violence.

There's even blood coming out of Natsume's mouth...

The fact that he took this much damage in spite of his high stats means that Fei and Yuri must have both hit him with just about all their strength.

All the reincarnations who lived in the elf village, where they were never exposed to violence, look especially horrified.

I'm guessing the reason they're not speaking up in spite of their alarm is that I explained to them beforehand what Natsume did.

Even the boys who were good friends with Natsume are standing by and letting it happen.

It's at this point that I finally realize I was being too pushy about my opinion earlier, criticizing Wakaba and the others much too harshly.

I can even understand why Negishi—or I guess it's Sophia now—silenced me so unsympathetically.

I really am an idiot.

It's like I can't do anything right.

I should be grateful to Wakaba for cutting the meeting off for today, before things could get any more emotionally charged, in order to give us all time to think.

"We'd better get a few in for Sue's sake, too."

Fei's chipper voice reminds me that I still have to ask Natsume about Sue.

It didn't seem like she came with the imperial army for the attack on the elf village.

I've got to find out if he knows what she's doing now.

"Natsume, where is Sue? What is she doing?"

"Oh yeah, her."

Grimacing, Natsume drags himself up and returns to his chair.

“You know she’s workin’ with Wakaba and them, right? Far as I know, she ain’t even brainwashed—she’s helpin’ ’em of her own accord.”

“Excuse me?”

“We both know that’s not true.”

Fei furrows her brow dangerously, and I glare at Natsume, too.

When she attacked our father, I clearly saw in Sue’s status condition that she was being brainwashed by Natsume.

Is he really trying to talk his way out of that now?

“No, seriously. The only time I brainwashed her was when she killed the king. I called it off after that, too.”

“...What does that mean?”

“Weren’t you listenin’? Your little sister is workin’ with those guys of her own free will. The only reason I brainwashed her for that part was ’cause Wakaba ordered me—said she probably wouldn’t kill her own damn dad otherwise. I swear, I didn’t brainwash her other than that.”

I exchange glances with Katia and Fei.

They look just as confused as I am.

Would Natsume really bother to lie at this point?

Whether he’d stand to gain anything from it or not, he certainly doesn’t seem like he’s lying.

It sounds to me like he’s telling the honest truth.

“Maybe she was being directly controlled by Wakaba like Natsume?”

Katia suggests a plausible explanation.

“What do you think?”

“Beats me. I didn’t even know myself that I was being controlled until it was over. I got no way of knowin’ whether it was happenin’ to her, too, or not.”

“Right, that makes sense.”

“But if ya ask me, I don’t think it was.”

“Why not?”

“I told ya she was workin’ with them of her own free will, but it was more like she was bein’ threatened into it.”

“Threatened?”

That surprises me.

Were Wakaba and the others threatening Sue to make her help them?

“Yep. Like, ‘You wouldn’t want anything to happen to *him*, would you?’”

He points at me as he speaks.

“Me?”

“Damn right. Wakaba and her crew have had their eyes on you for ages now.”

“But why...?”

At first, I find it hard to believe.

But then, when I think about it, it does make sense in some ways.

Sue had been acting a bit strangely since we started attending the academy. Most of the major incidents have been far more recent, like the kingdom coup that was staged using Natsume and the conspiracy with the Word of God church, but I wouldn’t be surprised if they had been planning those things for years now.

In fact, I don’t see how they could’ve pulled all this off *without* several years of preparation.

But even then, I still don’t understand why Wakaba and the others would be focused on me specifically.

Because I’m the hero?

No, that only happened relatively recently.

Assuming that Wakaba’s people were already working behind the scenes before then, Julius must have still been alive at the time.

...Is it because I’m Julius’s brother, then?

Were they thinking of using me as a hostage to deal with Julius or something?

Then maybe that's how they threatened Sue?

...It sounds reasonable enough, but it's only a theory.

The only way to find out the truth would be to either ask Sue or confront Wakaba and the rest directly.

"Either way, is Sue all right?"

I put that line of questioning aside for now to make sure that Sue isn't in any danger.

"Yep. I thought for sure she'd follow us all the way here, but they sent her off somewhere else right before we left. I dunno where, though."

I turn toward Yuri.

She was likely with Sue for a while, like Natsume.

"I'm sorry. I'm afraid I don't know where dear little Sue is, either..."

"Gotcha..."

Sounds like I'll have to ask Wakaba where Sue is, too.

"I guess we've still got a lot of questions to ask Wakaba and the others."

"Yeah. We've gotta talk things out more with them."

"Talk things out, huh...?"

As Katia and I nod at each other, Natsume groans meaningfully.

He looks deeply unimpressed as he stares at the two of us.

"What?"

"Oh, nothin'. I was just thinkin' how pathetic it is that I lost to such a bunch of gutless wimps."

"Hmph!"

"Guh?!"

The second Natsume insults us, Fei's fist comes down hard on his head.

She must have held back a little bit this time, at least, since he doesn't go

falling out of his chair again.

“I’d watch how you speak to us if I were you, okay?”

Even as Fei glares down at him, Natsume doesn’t complain.

It’s clear that he was serious about accepting any punishment.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I ask him.

“...You people don’t seriously think it’s all over now, do you?”

“What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

I accidentally repeat the same question.

“I’m talkin’ about Wakaba and them.”

The slight listlessness he’s been wearing leaves Natsume’s face as he stares seriously into my face.

“Don’t you get it? Or are ya just too chicken to face the truth? You’re the damn hero, and they’re the demon army. Remember?”

Right...

I don’t know what to say.

Maybe Natsume’s right that I’ve been avoiding the truth.

Demons are the natural enemies of humans.

And Wakaba is the person who killed Julius, too.

“You really think they’re just gonna say ‘okay, bye’ and go back to the demon territory now that they’ve destroyed the elves?”

Silence falls. Nobody has a word to say in response to Natsume.

“I got no idea what their endgame is exactly, ’cause I was nothin’ more than a pawn to them. But they’re up to *some*thin’, that’s for damn sure. For one thing, they were gatherin’ up people with all the Seven Deadly Sins and Seven Heavenly Virtues skills. Apparently, they need something called ‘keys.’ I already gave mine to ’em, not that I knew what it was anyway.”

“Keys?”

“Yep. And before you ask, I have no idea how they’re gonna use ‘em. But for what it’s worth, in case you couldn’t tell, they know a lot of secrets about this world. A hell of a lot more than we do, I’d bet.”

He’s certainly right about that.

After all, I only just learned about the real nature of Taboo today.

Oh, right, I should tell the rest of them about it.

...Although I’m a little scared of how Yuri will react.

“Actually, about that...I’m guessing Wakaba and the others are getting their information from the Taboo skill.”

“Taboo?”

Just as I expected, the first to react to my words is Yuri.

Her church, the Word of God, has always executed anyone who acquires the Taboo skill, no questions asked.

But once I maxed out Taboo, I understood why.

“The truth is, my Taboo skill reached its max level. Because the price for using my Mercy skill is that the Taboo skill levels up.”

Yuri’s eyes flash wide open.

“When it maxed out, it gave me a bunch of information...about the origins of this world.”

I hold up a hand to stop Yuri from protesting as I continue.

“Information?”

“Yeah. Most of which backed up what Wakaba was saying.”

Katia nods, then looks at Yuri as she voices her doubts. “But if that’s what it does, then why was the Word of God religion executing anyone with the Taboo skill?”

“Because...”

Should I really say this out loud?

I hesitate for a moment, but I’m sure Wakaba and the others would confirm it

anyway if anyone asked.

“The reason this world is on the verge of destruction isn’t just because of the elves. If anything, the people who lived here were just as much to blame.”

Then I explain the information I learned from Taboo.

About how the people of this planet used up something called MA energy and drained the world of its life force.

And how to make up for it, they’ve been reborn in this same world over and over, with the power of the skills and stats they earned in each lifetime taken from them to be used toward rebuilding the planet.

“I see. So that’s why the church went after people with the Taboo skill...”

“It’s basically confronting the people of this world with their own past sins. I’m guessing they were taking measures to keep the truth from spreading around.”

“So that means the Word of God church knows about the truth behind Taboo and was working with Wakaba’s side as well?”

“Probably. Natsume, did you use your brainwashing on the Word of God?”

“Nope.”

“That settles it, then. Am I right?”

I look at Ogi and Kusama, who are still tied up.

“Uh... Yeah, pretty much?” Kusama looks resigned.

“Huh? What? Wait...”

Yuri seems increasingly alarmed as she looks between us.

She’s always believed in the Word of God.

It must be overwhelming for her to find those doctrines and ideals suddenly turned on their heads.

Since she was so devoted to her religion, it might be hard for her to accept this.

Maybe I shouldn’t have revealed it to her right after being freed from

Natsume's brainwashing, when she's probably still mentally and emotionally vulnerable.

"Let's stop talking about this for today. I think we probably all need some time to process everything and get our thoughts in order."

It's not just Yuri: Kudo and the others probably all want time to think, too.

We need time to sort through our feelings.

"We'll hear the rest of the story from Wakaba and the others starting tomorrow. What are they going to do next? We won't know whether we're with them or against them unless we find out their plans first."

I don't know what Wakaba and her side are trying to do.

I get the impression that she'll stop at nothing to achieve her goals—she even brainwashed Natsume.

What is it that she wants to accomplish so badly that she's willing to go that far?

We have to find out.

Her objective, and her plan for achieving it.

I can understand why they wanted to wipe out the elves.

But she did it by sacrificing the imperial army soldiers in the process.

Not only that, but my father the king was killed, and the kingdom is still in utter chaos.

And before that, there were many other losses at the hands of the demon army.

Including my brother Julius...

The actions of Wakaba's side are accompanied by far too many losses.

If their next move is going to lead to even more lives lost...

No matter how noble the ultimate goal might be, I...

But...what can I even do about it?

"Atone."

The curse that's been repeating in my head all this time seems to grow even louder.

Whenever my will gets weaker, it starts to take over.

"Atone."

Stop it!

What am I supposed to atone for?

What did I, or any of us, ever do wrong?!

"Shun?"

Noticing my distress, Katia calls out to me with a worried expression.

"I'm okay. I was just...thinking about what I'm supposed to do next, too."

It isn't a lie.

I really don't have any idea what to do now.

Everything's gotten so complicated, to the point where I feel like my thoughts are puzzle pieces I can't seem to put together.

Although maybe it would be more accurate to say I feel like I've lost my way.

I've always tried to do what I thought was the right thing.

But did any of it even matter?

My brother Julius died, my father was killed in front of my eyes, Sue was forced to kill him by Natsume, and the kingdom has fallen.

I came to the elf village to stop Natsume, but in the end, I was knocked out before I could do anything. Then it turned out that Natsume was being used by Wakaba all along.

Huge waves have been set into motion, and I had no idea.

I thought I was acting of my own volition all this time, but now it's starting to seem like I was just being swept along by those waves.

What am I supposed to do now?

Is there even anything I *can* do, up against Wakaba and her allies?

It certainly doesn't feel like it.

Even earlier, all I could do was hit the floor without putting up any real resistance.

"Atone."

I shake my head rapidly, trying to stave off the curse and my own fears alike.

The voice isn't going to stop echoing.

But all I can do is pretend not to hear it.

"Shun. Are you sure you're all right? You look pale."

"Yeah, I think I'm still feeling a little under the weather. I'm going to head back to the room to rest a bit more. Then I can settle down and think about what to do next."

I try to reassure Katia, then start walking toward the stairs.

Did my response come out all right?

The Taboo curse seems to have my emotions running high.

I'm sure I could have handled that exchange with Kyouya more peacefully, too.

Kyouya must have had his own reasons and hardships, too, but I just got worked up and yelled my opinions at him.

I hope we can sit down together and talk things out properly sometime soon.

But that chance never came.

The world was moving far more quickly than I realized, without a moment to spare for thought.

As if everything keeps rolling downhill, getting worse and worse.



FRIENDS

“Oof!”

My perfect roundhouse kick sends Vampy tumbling to the ground, clutching her stomach.

Truly, it was a beautifully crafted kick, designed to deal just enough damage to Vampy without sending her flying in the process.

An admirable effort, if I do say so myself.

“Wh-why...?”

Vampy groans out the word as she rolls around on the ground, but I don’t hear anything. Did you?

I wrap her up in thread and start dragging her along.

Most people would get all scraped up from this kind of treatment, but come on now. Her defense is high enough that it shouldn’t be a problem.

She can keep on kissing the ground, for all I care.

“Miss White! Hang on a second!”

As I’m dragging Vampy along behind me, Mr. Oni grabs my shoulder.

“I know Miss Sophia misspoke, but you’re partially responsible for what happened in there, too. Isn’t this a little overboard?”

Excuse me?

Mr. Oni’s making no sense. I find myself staring intensely into his face.

My ten pupils that are normally hidden behind closed eyelids fix on Mr. Oni’s eyes.

The intensity of my Evil Eyes intimidates Mr. Oni a little, but he still manages to keep talking.

“You should’ve explained things a lot more. We’re used to extrapolating from

your short sentences, but even that has its limits. There has to be more synergy here. The reason Miss Sophia made that mistake is because you didn't explain things clearly enough."

Sin-ergy?

But sinful energy is what got us into this mess in the first place!

...Okay, yeah, that was corny.

Sooo what are you trying to say?

You're asking me to explain things better, is that it?

Explain things? ME?!

No waaay.

"Miss White?"

"Helloooo?!"

I ignore Mr. Oni and start walking again; he calls out to me in confusion, while Vampy shrieks in protest.

"Were you listening to me?"

"Yes, exactly! I don't deserve to be treated like this!"

The two of them keep raising a fuss, but I carry on ignoring them.

Vampy is flailing around in an effort to escape her bonds, which I also ignore.

Does she really think she can break out of my thread that easily?

Haven't you heard?

There's no escaping a god.

I keep dragging Vampy toward my destination.

She goes on making a racket the whole time, but Mr. Oni appears to have given up for the time being, following behind us in silence.

I don't think his silence means he's satisfied, by any means.

But that silence only lasts until our destination comes into view.

"What the...?"

While Mr. Oni's mouth drops open, Vampy finally closes hers.

Yeah, it's a little overwhelming.

Since we're standing in front of a super-gigantic UFO, after all.

This is where I was trying to take them.

It's the spaceship that Potimas tried to use to escape from this planet at the very last moment.

Ignoring them as they stare in shock, I walk right into the UFO.

Which means Vampy gets dragged along with me, of course.

Unwilling to be left behind, Mr. Oni hurriedly starts following behind us again.

Both of them stare with wide-eyed curiosity at the inside of the UFO.

It's so absurdly large that it takes a long time to get around the inside on foot, but there's certainly no shortage of things to look at.

After all, this UFO was developed with a long journey through space in mind, so it's got tons of equipment to prepare for that journey.

Just looking around at all that is plenty entertaining.

Although Vampy looks pretty funny gazing around in awe while still being tied up in thread and bent over backward.

I get that it's the only position that lets her see everything, but I still think it's rather unladylike.

Hmm?

Who tied her up like that in the first place?

I don't see how that's relevant.

The sightseeing tour ends when we reach our ultimate destination.

Namely, the innermost part of the UFO, where the Demon Lord is looking at a monitor, flanked by her three spider puppet guards.

I assume they're one short because Fiel is out hanging off that geezer again?

"Hmm? Oh, hello there."

The Demon Lord notices us and waves.

I guess she moved into this UFO while we were talking to the reincarnations.

Although that's why I came here, too, of course.

"Did you mess something up again, Sophia?"

"What do you mean by 'again,' Ms. Ariel? Why, that almost makes it sound as if I'm always messing things up."

Huh? Is she serious right now?

I dunno how she can be so oblivious.

See? Even the Demon Lord is fighting back a laugh.

"You've got to stop picking on her, though, White."

I'm not picking on herrr.

I'm just educating her, that's aaaall.

"So, what did she do this time?"

"Well, you see..."

For some reason, the Demon Lord asks Mr. Oni instead of me, and Mr. Oni starts answering her without a moment's hesitation.

I mean, yeah.

That's the right call.

But still, it feels like they're saying they can't count on me, which is kind of insulting.

I can do it if I really try, you know!

It's just that I don't bother trying, 'cause I don't want to!

You believe me, right?

"Ahh. I getcha."

Once Mr. Oni fills her in, the Demon Lord winces, looking at Vampy.

"Yeah, Sophia did screw up by letting that slip, but I'd say White's more to blame for giving a thorough opinion in the first place."

Objection!

I did nothing wrong!

Don't blame me!

"Well, what's the truth? Can they really not go back to Earth?"

The Demon Lord looks at me intently.

"Nope," I answer right away.

"Okay. If White says no, then I guess it's no. But why *isn't* it possible? Sophia misspoke because you didn't explain those important details. You understand the importance of information and clear communication better than anyone, don't you? And since you have all the details, you're the only person who knows which information matters most. You have to consider things from Sophia's point of view. She can't even tell what's true or not."

While the Demon Lord lectures me in a gentle tone, it takes most of my energy to keep from pouting.

Who do you think you are, my mom?

Oh, right, you're my grandma... Sorry.

"You always try to take care of everything by yourself, which means you're careless when it comes to working with others. You don't see the point in conversing with other people. Why would you bother when you could do it all on your own if you really felt like it? Basically, you're a loner to the core."

Ouch. That's harsh, but she's not wrong.

"Although I suppose I can't really blame you. I was the same way before we met, after all. Maybe that's what happens when you're too powerful for your own good."

Based on stats alone, the Demon Lord was probably the strongest person in the world.

Even her subordinate spider army was created by her Egg-Laying skill, which means they were basically her own clones.

"Still, Sophia and Wrath are your friends and allies. No matter how bad you

might be at communicating, you've got to stop avoiding it and face them properly, don't you think?"

Huh?

Friends?

What?

Friends.

Hmm...

Oh, okay.

Vampy and Mr. Oni are my friends, huh?

Is the Demon Lord actually a genius? How'd she notice something crazy like that?

Hang on a second.

Why do I feel so confused right now?

What are "friends," exactly?

Like people who share your last name?

Hmm. No, I'm pretty sure that's "family."

So, what are friends?

People who do things with you.

People in the same position or profession as you.

People who are similar to you.

Those all have slightly different definitions, but they more or less add up.

In other words, people who stand by your side.

Are we standing side by side?

Frankly, they're nowhere near me in terms of strength.

I'm waaay out front, and they're waaay in back.

So I couldn't call them "friends" in that way.

But as far as wanting the same things, you could certainly say we're side by side.

Does that mean we really are friends, then?

Damn, that's crazy.

I've always been a loner. Who would've thought I'd finally make some friends?!

Hmm.

Ummm...?

How are you supposed to interact with friends, exactly?

Teach me, O Great One!

"Uh-oh, White's down for the count. This is no good. I guess it was too soon to hit her with the concept of friendship. I thought you had enough hard work and victories under your belt, but I guess not..."

"Sorry?"

"Listen, Wrath. Despite all appearances, White is still a babe in the woods when it comes to emotions. Don't let her looks and attitude fool you. When she does something that seems irrational, most of the time she's trying to use violence to distract from anything that might look bad for her. See? Pretty childish when you put it that way, isn't it?"

"Um... right..."

"So when she does something bad, you have to scold her like a child, not voice your opinion like you would with an adult. Otherwise, I don't think she'll ever get any better."

"Scold her? Me?"

"Well, Sophia's out of the question. You're the only one I can count on here. Best of luck."

"Wait a minute! What do you mean I'm out of the question?!"

They're all being very noisy, which is distracting me from my deep contemplation of this strange human concept called "friendship."

Uhhh, the only friends I know about are the ones I have in online games!

So just like online gaming friends, you're nice to them when you feel like it, and you kick them around when they're bugging you? Got it!

In that case, I figure maybe I'll pat Vampy's head to show her some affection, but when I see her hopping around all tied up and shrieking, it kind of pisses me off, so I kick her instead.

"Why did you just kick me?! Seriously! Why?!"

Ugh, pipe down.

That's just what friends do, right?

"I get the feeling White has come up with some extremely inaccurate understanding of something... Eh, whatever."

"Miss Ariel, please don't give up on that so easily."

"Well, more importantly..."

"More importantly?!"

This exchange between the Demon Lord and Mr. Oni sounds like a comedy routine.

But the Demon Lord's face looks completely serious.

I guess she really does want to talk about something important.

"White, what do you think about this?"

The Demon Lord jerks her chin toward the monitor.

From her expression, it looks like even Mr. Oni and Vampy can tell that she's serious.

I look up and focus on the monitor.

...Even though Vampy is still all wrapped up in thread.

"What's wrong with this, exactly?"

Mr. Oni looks over the words on the screen for a while but doesn't seem to understand what the Demon Lord is concerned about.

And while Vampy is too stupidly prideful to admit it, her expression clearly indicates that she doesn't get it, either.

"A lot."

The Demon Lord stares in deep thought at the screen.

It appears to be Potimas's diary of sorts.

Since he was such a detail-oriented person, he appears to have kept a record of every day's events without fail.

Although given that it's just a businesslike, straightforward list of details, maybe calling it a diary isn't quite accurate.

There's not a lot of his opinions or anything.

Maybe the odd observation about his research, but even that is incredibly rare.

In fact, there's no trace of emotions in any of it. It's not very diary-like at all.

However, the part the Demon Lord is displaying now is one of the rare instances where you can tell how Potimas was feeling.

The impression I get from it is panic.

And doubt.

[All of a sudden, the aggregate amount of MA energy has drastically decreased. The cause is unknown. There is likely some connection to the dimensional tremors I have been monitoring with my equipment, but at present I cannot say for sure. Something is obviously amiss. I have not seen such an occurrence in all the time that the system has been in place. Has some major failure occurred within the system? Is it safe to remain on this planet? The answer is unclear. Güliedistodiez has forbidden me from leaving this planet, but perhaps I should prepare for escape just in case.]

Ahh.

I get it.

It was the incident with the hero before last and the previous Demon Lord.

They tried to use Dimensional Magic to mess with something and failed,

causing a misfire in a classroom in Japan.

This entry is about the incident that ended up getting us reincarnations brought into this world.

Thanks to some major screwups on their part, we got reborn into this world, and the Demon Lord took up her post to run around trying to replenish all the MA energy that was used up in the aftermath.

Vampy and Mr. Oni have heard about this incident, so they're not surprised when they read this.

That's probably why they're confused about what the Demon Lord is worried about.

But there's a huge problem.

Because Potimas is the one who wrote this.

"What does this mean? That Potimas wasn't the one who roped the old hero and the previous Demon Lord into doing that?"

Right.

Exactly.

The fact that Potimas was this surprised about the incident caused by the hero before Julius and the previous Demon Lord means that someone else was pulling the strings.

Huh?

Didn't they just do it of their own accord, you ask?

I don't see how they could've possibly done that without knowing the first thing about how the system works.

There has to be someone who explained to them how the system works.

Otherwise, two people who didn't know anything couldn't have possibly sent an attack across time and space to reach D in that classroom.

Even Potimas didn't seem to know D existed at all.

...In which case, it's fairly obvious who the culprit must be.

I'm sure the Demon Lord knows it, too.

She just doesn't want to admit it.

"Precisely. I am responsible for all of that."

A new voice echoes, one that doesn't belong to any of us.

The person who teleports into the room is exactly who I expected.

An administrator of this world, who appears to be wearing black armor.

It's Black, also known as Güliedistodiez.

Now then, good evening, everyone.

We're here at the fantasy world number-one showdown.

The defending champion is Administrator Güliedistodiez.

Versus our challenger, the Demon Lord.

A god versus a Demon Lord: It's a tale as old as time, but that's what makes it so legendary.

Will the god emerge victorious?

Or will the underdog Demon Lord eke out a win?

Either way, we're in for a great match, folks.

Now, before the starting bell has even rung, the Demon Lord attacks first!

What a dirty move!

But she *is* a demon, after all.

For her, dirty is a compliment!

The champion takes this surprise attack head-on with some serious force!

A right straight directly to the face!

It makes even the champion stumble back a few steps!

What did you think of that attack, commentator Spider B?

I've gotta say, I think the champion took that hit on purpose, announcer Spider A.

What do you mean?

Well, the champion was clearly aware that the Demon Lord's surprise attack was coming.

But instead of dodging or defending against it, he deliberately took it to the face.

Perhaps that's how confident he is as the reigning champ.

I see!

So he decided to let the challenger's first attack hit him to show just how much more powerful he is!

But the Demon Lord doesn't stop there!

She grabs him by the collar—the collar? Can you call that the collar? Well, anyway, she grabs him by the collar and drags him down to the ground!

Now she's sitting on top of him!

She's in mount position!

"What's going on here?!"

The Demon Lord demands an explanation!

It seems she's infuriated with the champion for letting her do as she pleases without resistance!

Come on, fight!

Fight me for real, she seems to say!

"...I'm sorry."

But what's this!

The champion shows no interest in fighting!

What in the world does this mean?!

Has the reigning champ lost the will to fight?!

The Demon Lord starts beating the champion with her fists!

Whew.

Okay, I'm bored of commentating.

"Miss Ariel! Stop! Don't do this!"

Mr. Oni grabs the Demon Lord's arms and pulls her back, stopping her in the middle of striking Black's face repeatedly.

She struggles in his grip, trying to keep hitting Black, but Mr. Oni's strength keeps her in place.

After her fight with Potimas, the Demon Lord lost most of her power.

Now she's no stronger than the little girl she appears to be—maybe even weaker than that.



She can't even struggle against Mr. Oni holding her back.

Good job, Mr. Oni.

The Demon Lord is basically a retiree who needs ample bed rest at this point.

That kind of violence isn't good for her health.

Still, I held off on stopping her right away because I figured she had to let off some of her anger before we could get anywhere, and Black needed to take a few punches anyway.

So that was the right time to intervene.

Mr. Oni's so good at reading the room.

Hmm? Vampy?

She's still all tied up and looks like she has no idea what's going on. Why do you ask?

"What's going on?"

"I'm sorry."

Even as Mr. Oni holds her back, the Demon Lord keeps demanding an explanation from Black, and all he says is, "I'm sorry."

Keeping one eye on that situation, I continue reading Potimas's logs where the Demon Lord left off.

[Güliedistodiez made contact with one of my bodies that I had working on the outside. Things keep getting stranger. He asked if anything unusual had occurred, no doubt referring to the sudden decrease in MA energy and the dimensional tremors that developed at the same time. Of course, I have no intention of sharing any information with him. I attempted to probe him for information instead, but it appears that he himself has no concrete idea of what happened, either. In the end, we parted ways without accomplishing anything. If even he has no knowledge of the situation at hand, I must gather more information.]

[The hero has been replaced. This newly christened hero is Prince Julius, second son of the Analeit Kingdom. This matters little to me in itself, but the

fact that there is a new hero must mean that the previous hero, Darresmeig, has died. Given the time line, there must be some connection to the dimensional tremors a few days prior. It would make some degree of sense if Darresmeig was responsible for the tremors. I have not been able to confirm the replacement of the Demon Lord yet, but if they were working together, I imagine he has died as well. And Güliedistodiez yet lives. Which means they must have failed, I suppose. How useless.]

[The individual I arranged to be birthed as my next main body has begun to say strange things to me through Telepathy. A newborn presumed to have no self-awareness using Telepathy is already unthinkable, but the information therein is even more outlandish. Yet what I have gathered is fascinating indeed. It seems there are reincarnations with memories of a different world from this one. I had wondered where the MA energy that vanished in those dimensional tremors went, but I never suspected it would have ended up in a parallel world. I do not know why, when it should have been directed to Güliedistodiez, but the outcome is very intriguing. Reincarnations, with souls from another world, different from ours. If I use those, perhaps they could even lead to a breakthrough in my currently thwarted research? It is certainly worth trying. In which case, I must begin collecting samples at once. Fortunately, the individual who told me of their existence, Filimøs, wishes me to take these reincarnations into my care. Well then, I shall gladly carry out her wish.]

Oof.

Where do I even start with this?

It's so heinous that just reading it feels like I'm whittling away at my own sanity.

This is the scary thing about people who commit terrible crimes without even feeling that they're doing anything wrong.

It's clear even from these short entries that he saw the old hero, the previous Demon Lord, and most of all, Ms. Oka, not as individuals, but as tools for his own use.

I know this is old news by now, but man, P-man was the woorst!

If I dig through his data some more, I might find some exchanges with the

hero before last or the previous Demon Lord, but I don't think that's really necessary.

Besides, I don't really want to read any more of this.

I think I'm getting the picture.

I mean, not that I didn't know already.

"You know, Gülie... I always thought we were friends, kindred spirits... But was I alone on that? Was I operating under a huge misunderstanding, maybe?"

Uh-oh.

While I left the Demon Lord and Black to their own devices, things took a pretty drastic turn.

The Demon Lord looks like she's about to cry.

What a horrible man, making a little girl cry like that!

...Okay, just kidding, but I should probably step in.

"Moron."

Whoops. My bad.

I meant to say something to Black, but I just blurted out my innermost thoughts about him.

Well, whatever.

"She won't understand if you don't explain yourself. Quit apologizing and tell the whole thing from the beginning."

Black, who's half sitting up on the ground, looks at me with wide eyes.

The Demon Lord turns toward me with a similarly stunned expression.

"...Really? Talk about the pot and the kettle, Master..."

Vampy starts spouting nonsense, so I kick her again.

Once I've silenced her, I turn back to getting the whole story out of Black.

It takes a while, since he keeps inserting pointless comments like, "It was all my fault" and "Because of my mistakes" and so on.

But to sum it up in three simple steps:

Black called on the hero and the Demon Lord to make a truce between humans and demons.

The P-man secretly convinced the hero and the Demon Lord that administrators are bad.

So those two decided, “All right, let’s take down an administrator!”

How did they come to that conclusion, exactly?

Well, to get into a little more detail, it went a little something like this: First, the wear and tear on the souls of this world’s people, especially those of demons, was getting more and more severe, to the point where the demon birth rate was dropping.

Because of that, the demons were in no position to keep fighting a war.

Realizing that the demon race was going to go extinct at this rate, Black suggested the cease-fire to the Demon Lord and the hero.

Now, that’s all well and good.

There’s nothing wrong with Black’s decision there.

I don’t know all the details about that time period, but based on how the likes of Agner and Balto were scrambling to restore the demon race, it’s not hard to imagine that they were in seriously dire straits.

Not to mention, since Black usually just watches from the sidelines without getting proactively involved, you know it must’ve been really bad for him to actually step in.

Hell, if he hadn’t gotten involved and the war kept going, the demons might have even been gone completely by the time we reincarnations came into the picture.

Maybe that’s going too far, but it was definitely still a serious crisis.

But this is where Black made a miscalculation.

Namely, he didn’t realize that P-man had already made contact with the former hero and the previous Demon Lord.

And just like he did with Ms. Oka, he'd convinced them that administrators were the enemy.

Y'know, claiming they were using the hero and the Demon Lord to make the people of this world fight each other, then harvesting their energy after their deaths and all that good stuff.

I mean, that's all true, but it makes the administrators look bad when you put it that way.

If you knew the whole story, you'd realize they're doing all this to restore the world.

As far as what the old hero and Demon Lord thought after hearing things from both Black and P-man, nobody else can say.

And since they're both dead now, we'll never know for sure.

Whatever their reasons, all we know is that they picked an ill-advised fight with the administrators and wasted a ton of MA energy, to boot.

How did they end up expending such a massive amount of MA energy?

Even if you tried to challenge an administrator, fighting in itself shouldn't use up MA energy like that.

Unless the hero and the Demon Lord are involved.

Those two roles come with various hidden properties, thanks to a certain evil god who packed them with weird features.

The hero gets stronger against the Demon Lord.

Since demons live longer and are generally stronger than humans, this is a built-in handicap to help the hero stand a fighting chance.

When a hero fights a Demon Lord who's significantly stronger, the hero expends MA energy to get a temporary power-up of sorts.

But this power-up actually applies to situations other than fighting a Demon Lord, too.

Namely, when the hero fights a god.

Currently, Black is the only proper god in this world.

Sariel can't move since she's become the core of the system.

In other words, Black is the only one who can do anything to fight an outside attacker.

Gods are always fighting over territory, stealing planets from one another.

This planet isn't all that appealing at the moment, since the dragons have abandoned it and it's on the verge of destruction, meaning it's not very likely to be targeted.

But still, there's no guarantee it won't happen.

It's still possible that the dragons might return to reclaim it, or some stray god might pop in.

The hero and the Demon Lord are the world's main defense against such gods.

When either of them challenge a god, they can spend MA energy to power up.

Of course, it won't be easy to beat a god, and it's far from safe to cram enough energy to fight one into a single individual, even temporarily.

On top of that, when you're dealing with a god, the amount of MA energy consumed is far larger than the amount of energy consumed in any fight between a hero and a Demon Lord.

But this feature still exists.

And wouldn't you know it? The range of applicable targets for the feature somehow includes administrators.

Say what?

I know—it makes no sense.

If this was an online game, it would be like giving players special abilities to fight GMs.

Not to mention that using it could very well kill the whole server.

Basically, it would be a feature so stupid it could overturn the entire foundation of the game.

In fact, at that point I'd call it a bug, not a feature.

But in this case, you better believe it's an intended function, not a bug.

I mean, think about the evil god who made it.

My guess is that D left it in so that the people of this world would have the option of challenging an administrator.

Although I'm sure if you asked why, the only answer you'd get is "because it seems more entertaining that way."

An ordinary person, taking on a god.

I don't know if that would end up changing the world, but I bet D would find an event like that amusing either way, don't you think?

Yeah.

In other words, the hero before last and the previous Demon Lord challenged a god in the form of an administrator and succeeded in using MA energy to momentarily gain enormous power.

Of course, the cost for this was wasting a massive amount of MA energy and both their lives.

No doubt both of them felt that this sacrifice was worth it.

But in the end, all that it accomplished was throwing away a ton of MA energy and putting the world in an even worse predicament.

As a bonus, they even went out of their way to slaughter a classroom full of reincarnations from another world for no good reason.

Talk about a hot mess.

Now, did you notice anything about this story?

That's right: Black wasn't particularly responsible for any of these events.

"From what you've said so far, isn't it mostly Potimas's fault?"

"No. I am to blame for not clearly explaining things to the hero and the Demon Lord."

Black stubbornly insists that it's his fault, in spite of the Demon Lord's

perfectly reasonable observation.

He kept harping on the idea that he was responsible throughout his explanation, too.

Now, it's true that I can't say Black was completely 100 percent blameless in this situation.

I don't know what kind of explanation he gave to the old hero and Demon Lord, but if he had succeeded in winning their trust in the process, none of this would have happened.

Since it seems like they trusted the P-man more than him.

That's sad, for sure.

But still, obviously P-man is the most at fault here for having tricked the Demon Lord and the hero.

Though judging by P-man's diary, they didn't work with him directly, instead acting on their own in a way that promptly blew up in their faces.

Maybe P-man was just half hoping they'd defeat Black for him.

He was always weirdly good at correctly guessing the truth, based on what information he could gather.

Which only made him even more annoying!

"Gülie, what are you hiding?"

"I have nothing to hide. I failed in my duties. That is all."

Black feigns ignorance at the Demon Lord's questioning.

But by now, it's painfully obvious that he is hiding something.

"The tragedy occurred because I foolishly gave them incomplete knowledge about the system. I am to blame for that."

Hmmm.

I mean, he's not lying.

He's leaving out an important detail, though.

It's true that the former hero and the previous Demon Lord did something

stupid.

It's true that P-man was the one who put them up to it, too.

And that Black was the one who gave them half-baked information about the system.

It all added up in the worst possible way.

You could say that everyone involved was partly responsible for pulling the strings.

But there's one more culprit who hasn't been named.

"The Goddess Sariel."

Black pulls back dramatically at my statement.

His eyes are ordering me not to say another word.

That's not gonna stop me, though!

"Someone redirected the attack meant for Black toward D. It was Sariel."

My words elicit a different reaction in everyone.

Black remains expressionless.

The Demon Lord looks like the fight has gone out of her.

Mr. Oni looks like it all makes sense to him now.

Vampy looks like an idiot who doesn't understand a damn thing.

It's obvious if you think about it, really.

The old hero and Demon Lord couldn't have possibly launched an attack at D when even the P-man didn't know about her existence.

Technically, if you used the system, it might be possible to find its creator and operator, D.

But you'd have to be extremely familiar with the inner workings of the system to do that.

Unless you were an administrator of the system, like Sariel the Goddess.

"Is that true?"

The Demon Lord looks at Black, but his only response is silence.

That in and of itself gives the answer away, though, y'know?

From Black's point of view, an attack meant for him was somehow blocked by Sarel, and that resulted in the loss of a bunch of MA energy and the arrival of reincarnations and all that. You can see how he would feel guilty for causing such a strange situation.

If he hadn't met with the hero and Demon Lord, they would never have known to target him with their attack in the first place.

Dimensional Magic isn't all-powerful.

As the evolved form of the already convenient Spatial Magic, it's ridiculously useful, of course.

But there are still plenty of things it can't do.

Although you can also say that about skills on the whole, I guess.

If you want to do something beyond how a skill is designed to function, you've got to have an understanding of conjuring, the basis of skills.

There are very few people who can use Spatial Magic in the first place, so the old hero and Demon Lord must have been crazy talented to be able to use Dimensional Magic.

But still, there are things it just can't do.

Dimensional Magic can't attack a target you've never seen or met before.

Just like with Spatial Magic, the first step of Dimensional Magic is designating a space.

Once you've done that, you move on to choosing a spell and setting it in motion, whether that's teleporting or attacking.

And the only space you can designate in that first step is a place where the user has physically been, or the general vicinity of a person the user has met.

By meeting with the former hero and the previous Demon Lord, he inadvertently became eligible as a possible target of attack.

If he'd been more careful and sent a subordinate instead of going to them

himself, they wouldn't have been able to target him.

Although I'm sure he went himself in order to gain their trust...

That really backfired on him, though.

Then, when they attacked him, Sariel tampered with the system to change the target to D.

Honestly, I couldn't tell you why.

I've got a few theories, but I have no way of confirming any of them, since I don't know exactly what she was thinking.

Was she just trying to protect Black, did she want to harm D, or was there some other reason?

The only way to find out would be to ask her.

Not that I particularly care to do that.

If I ever met her face-to-face, I'd get pissed off and want to punch her, probably.

Anyway, regardless of her reasons, I'm sure she didn't mean any ill will.

She was just reacting instinctively to avert a sudden disaster.

Not that she averted it very well...

But if Sariel hadn't intervened in her weird way, and the hero and Demon Lord actually hit Black with their attack, he would've either been dead or severely weakened.

Then I'm sure P-man would've noticed and made things even worse.

He might have even eliminated Black and reigned supreme.

Still, then all the MA energy that was used to attack Black could probably have been recovered, so it might've been better that way from an MA energy standpoint.

Because if it was used in this world, at least most of that MA energy would've gone back into the pool, if not all of it.

Not to mention, Black's death would probably mean that a considerable

amount of MA energy was gained.

Since it's possible to attack an administrator, I don't see why there wouldn't be a feature like that built into the system somewhere, too.

You know, something that absorbs a god to restore more MA energy.

But this is the situation we got instead.

Black is alive and unharmed, but in exchange, the world lost a ton of MA energy.

And the reincarnations came crashing into an age of upheaval.

I guess the situation would've been chaotic either way.

But at least we succeeded in eliminating P-man.

That means we rid the world of its worst rot, or cancer, or whatever you want to call the most unhelpful existence around.

Hrm.

When you look at it this way, it's hard to say which route would've been better, since they both have pluses and minuses.

But since it's impossible to imagine things getting anything but worse if P-man was still alive, I guess you could say this route is the right one, maybe?

Yeah, let's just go with that.

As inconvenient as it is for all the reincarnations.

Oh, except for me.

I mean, I was just a normal spider before I was reincarnated into this world. I'd probably be long dead by now if I stayed there.

Instead, I somehow wound up becoming a god, so I'm sure glad I got reincarnated.

Hmmm?

In that case, maybe Sariel did a good thing after all?

...Thanks, I guess.

“Gülie. It’s not your fault.”

“No... I still believe it is. Especially after I lived so carelessly all this time, never knowing I had caused all this trouble.”

The Demon Lord appears to have put aside thoughts of Sariel for now to reassure Black.

But he just smiles bitterly.

Riiight.

Black here didn’t know so much MA energy had been consumed, and he figured P-man was to blame for everything.

Once he figured out that he was unwittingly involved, of course this moron would feel responsible.

I’m sure a certain evil god was thoughtful enough to tell him aaall about it.

Otherwise, he would never have known what happened behind the scenes.

And that evil god is the only one who would know the whole story.

Seriously, talk about evil.

Hmm?

Why do I know all this, you ask?

Don’t underestimate my information-gathering skills, thank you very much!

My information-gathering clones have been keeping tabs on things all over the world, while the analysis team’s been hacking into the system and feeding me all the relevant information. Plus, I’ve been occasionally using my Past-Vision Evil Eye.

That’s a new Evil Eye I came up with recently that can show me scenes from the past, letting me gather circumstantial evidence and such to help figure out the truth.

Now I’m basically a super detective who can solve any cold case with ease.

Although I don’t use Past-Vision Evil Eye very much, since it’s far from user-friendly.

“If you feel that bad, just work harder now to make up for it.”

I decide to wrap things up before all this whining and hand wringing gets any more annoying.

“Yes...you’re right. I will.”

Okay, cool.

You do that.

I’ve got a huuuge job for you to handle after this, you know.

The incident the old hero and Demon Lord caused has led to this route, thanks to Sarii’s intervention.

Now, then.

What path will the people of this world choose when faced with the incident *I’m* about to cause?

Not that their choice is going to affect the outcome, in the end.



Interlude

KUNIHICO TAGAWA

...Yeah, I screwed up.

I don't feel bad for getting pissed at the class rep, okay?

That's on her for what she said.

But I definitely shouldn't have flown off the handle and almost hit her.

The class rep was being kept under watch here for years, which means her stats are probably real low.

If I'd hit her with all my might, she could've actually died...

"What d'you think I should do?"

"I would just apologize."

I awkwardly fled to hang out with Asaka, but she's being kinda cold.

Couldn't she at least try to mediate between me and the class rep or something?

"Oh, stop sulking and make sure you apologize today, will you? The longer you wait, the more awkward it's going to be, you know."

"...Fine."

"I mean, not *right* now—you both probably need to calm down a bit first. Why don't you go around lunchtime?"

"Yeah, I'll do that."

Sounds like Asaka isn't going to bail me out of this one.

She can be kind of overly practical at times like these...

I guess this one is my own fault, though.

But that means I've got time to kill till lunch.

...Should I go do the other thing, then?

Asaka did just say that waiting out stuff like this only makes it more awkward.

This isn't quite the same, but I think it'll only get harder the longer I wait, too.

Guess I better suck it up and charge right in.

"Asaka."

"...What is it? I don't like that look in your eyes."

"I'm gonna go see Merazophis."

At that, Asaka presses her fingers into her temples. "To do what, exactly...?"

"Nothin' really. I'm not gonna try to duke it out with him at this point, obviously. Especially since my weapon's broke and all."

My beloved katana got smashed up by that bastard Kyouya in yesterday's battle.

...Right, it's all smashed up.

My precious... Gone...

"Don't get depressed when you're the one who brought it up."

"But my swooord!"

That was my favorite weapon ever!

It was a memento from the time Asaka and I teamed up with a bunch of high-rank adventurers, working together to defeat a super-strong monster called a lightning dragon, then brought the materials to a talented blacksmith to finally create the ultimate katana!

Naturally, my first and best partner is Asaka, but that katana was a close second!

And now it's been destroyed...

"Don't cry on me."

"I'm not crying!"

I'm certainly sad enough to cry, but I'm obviously too old to actually shed tears over an object.

"Your staff got broken, too, didn't it? Aren't you bummed out?"

“Weapons are bound to break eventually.”

There’s that practical side of hers again...

“Ugh.” She sighs. “You’re just going to talk to him, right? Nothing else?”

“Uh-huh.”

I can’t try and take on Merazophis without a weapon.

Even if I did have my sword, I’m guessing I wouldn’t stand a chance fighting him one-on-one.

So I’m not going to see him to try to pick a fight.

If I don’t attack him, I doubt he’ll start anything with me, either.

“All right. Let’s go, then.”

“You’re coming with me?”

“I’d be worried about sending you alone.”

“Can you leave, though?”

I glance over at the sleeping Ms. Oka.

Asaka is supposed to be keeping an eye on her recovery.

“I’ll tag in Chie before we go.”

“Ahh, Nanase, huh?”

Our fellow reincarnation Chie Nanase is a caring girl. I’m sure she can handle it.

Thus, we flag down Nanase before we leave and put her in charge of watching Ms. Oka.

As we walk out of the building, a girl in white robes gives an order with a wave of her hand, and I sense that another white-robed person is following behind us, but I pretend not to notice.

I’m not surprised they would monitor us.

I’m sure they won’t attack us as long as we don’t make any funny moves, though.

If they were gonna kill us, they would've done it yesterday.

According to Wakaba and the others, they kept us alive "out of respect for our shared past lives."

It's still possible that some other part of the demon army might try to attack us, but I doubt we have to worry about that.

My impression of the demon army so far is that they're soldiers.

Faithful to their mission.

They coolly carry out their orders without any personal feelings getting involved, almost like some kind of machines.

I doubt they'd go against Wakaba's orders when she clearly ranks above them.

And the same goes for Merazophis.

I don't know much about him, to be honest.

We've only actually met three times.

The first was in our homeland, when he wiped out our clan.

He killed everyone but me and Asaka.

The second time was during the war against the demons.

As a demon general, he fought us when we were defending a fortress.

And the third time was yesterday's battle.

Although that being said, the one we fought yesterday was only a shadow of his full self created by some skill or other; I'm not sure if it actually counts as meeting.

Still, maybe whether it was his real body or a shadow clone doesn't matter that much, since his words and actions were his own.

Though we hardly exchanged any words at all.

Of these three encounters, he far overpowered us the first time, and we fought on a battlefield the other two times.

Naturally, none of these meetings left time for a long chat.

But after crossing blades with him twice, I'd say I've learned a little bit about him.

For instance, I'm pretty sure he's a ridiculously uptight bastard.

He's the very model of a perfect soldier.

He'd never go against his orders, and he'd certainly never wipe out a whole settlement of his own accord.

Which can only mean one thing.

Merazophis must have destroyed our clan because a higher-up told him to do so, right?

Wasn't he just following orders?

That's my theory.

All this time, I've been fighting toward the goal of one day defeating Merazophis, but maybe I had the wrong idea after all.

Honestly, what Wakaba and the others told us was so shocking, it's kinda put a damper on the whole thirst-for-revenge thing.

I want to know more about them, and about Merazophis, before I think things over.

What do I wanna do next?

If I'm gonna figure that out, I need to have a talk with Merazophis first.

"By the way, do you actually know where Merazophis is?"

"Uh..."

We wander aimlessly around the elf village, until finally the white-robed person keeping an eye on us gives in and offers to guide us, and we manage to meet with Merazophis before noon.

...Guess those white-robos have a soft side after all.

Who the hell said they were like machines? ...Right, I did.

"Now then. You say...you wish to speak with me?"

When we insisted on talking to Merazophis, we were led into one of the elf

houses.

He had evidently been cleaning up after the battle, but he met with us there.

Now we're sitting across from him at a table.

"Yeah. First, lemme introduce myself. I'm Kunihiko Tagawa, a reincarnation."

"I'm Asaka Kushitani, also a reincarnation."

"My name is Merazophis. I myself am not a reincarnation, but I happen to be close with three of them."

We start by exchanging introductions.

Asaka and I are very well aware of Merazophis, but it's possible that he didn't even know our names.

And there's one more thing I need to confirm.

"You might not remember this, but about ten years ago, you wiped out a village—more of a settlement, really—and we were the only two survivors."

"Of course I remember."

Merazophis nods.

Thank goodness. I didn't know what I was gonna do if he said he didn't remember.

I was afraid that even though this was a huge life-changing event for Asaka and me, it wasn't even worth remembering for Merazophis, but I guess not.

Otherwise I might've had to punch him.

Although I would have at least tried to resist, since I did just tell Asaka I wasn't planning to fight him.

...I dunno if I would've been able to hold back, though.

"That makes this easier, then. I want to know why our home and clan had to be destroyed. And I want to hear it straight from the horse's mouth."

"Hrmm..."

Merazophis seems genuinely thoughtful as he hears me out and contemplates my question.

Just as I suspected, he's not some evil villain who decided to destroy a whole settlement for no reason.

There must have been some reason for it, and someone must have assigned Merazophis to carry it out.

"...What are you going to do with that information?"

"I dunno," I answer. "I wanna hear it to help me figure out what to do."

"Very well. But it is not a very pleasant tale. Are you prepared?"

"Sure."

At my quick response, Merazophis heaves a sigh.

I guess this probably isn't very pleasant for him, either.

He's the person who killed my parents and the rest of my clan, yet something about his attitude gives me a positive impression.

At the same time, I have mixed feelings about it.

Like maybe if he was just some crazy villain, I'd be able to fight him without any kind of hesitation.

"Now then, where should I begin, exactly...? Just a moment."

With that, Merazophis stands and leaves the room.

Then he comes back holding two mugs.

"Here. This will probably take a while."

He sets the mugs in front of me and Asaka.

Damn, what a considerate bastard! Bet he's popular with the ladies!

"...Thanks."

"Much appreciated."

Keeping my exasperated thoughts to myself, I thank him for the drink.

Asaka immediately picks up her mug and takes a sip.

She's not the type to pass up anything that's offered to her...

What if it's poisoned or something? No, I guess Merazophis wouldn't need

such roundabout methods to kill us, which he clearly isn't gonna do anyway...

I follow her example and take a sip.

It's hot tea that tastes vaguely of apple.

"I'll attempt to explain as objectively as I can, but I imagine it will still be biased toward a demon's point of view. Try to bear with me."

What Merazophis tells us next is certainly far from pleasant, just as he promised.

In fact, it's downright depressing.

It was a lengthy explanation.

First, he explained the domestic conflict in the demon territory.

It was hard to tell what that had to do with our hometown being destroyed, but I'm sure he had his reasons for starting with that.

Asaka and I sat in silence and listened.

A rebel army, secretly aided by the elves, formed to resist the Demon Lord.

Ms. Oka was among those elves, he says.

But the rebel army was crushed by the official demon army, and the elves, including Ms. Oka, were left stranded in the demon territory, with no way to return to the human territory alive.

The biggest obstacle to their escape was the Human-Demon Buffer Zone, namely a tribe that lived there.

This tribe of despicable thieves would kill anyone they didn't recognize on sight and live off their stolen possessions.

...That's referring to our hometown, apparently.

For real?

That's what demons thought of our clan?

I was stunned, but Asaka seemed fairly unsurprised.

"Well, they really were quite obviously barbaric, remember?"

“Whaaat...?”

I guess Asaka saw the people of our clan that way, too.

She tells me that she was hoping to get away from that settlement as soon as possible.

Come on...seriously...?

I always remembered the men of that tribe being strong, cool adults. Were those just glorified memories all this time?

The unexpected and unwelcome truth about our tribe sends me into a tailspin, but Merazophis still has more to say.

In order to get Ms. Oka safely over to the human territory, it was decided that the only option was to preemptively attack and destroy our hometown to secure safe passage.

“Wait a minute. Why didn’t you just make Ms. Oka a prisoner of war or something?” Asaka asks.

“I’m afraid that was impossible, because of Potimas Harrifenas’s particular abilities.”

I met Potimas, the patriarch of the elves, once before; it turns out he’s the reason this world is in shambles.

Plus, he has the ability to take over someone else’s body.

He can’t do it to just anyone, but evidently if someone meets the right conditions, he can erase their mind and operate their body like his own.

Ms. Oka falls into that category of possible hosts, so if they had kept her as a prisoner of war, Potimas probably would have taken over her body immediately.

“...Damn, that’s gnarly.”

“Yes. Which is why we were unable to lay a hand on Missoka.”

I knew from what Wakaba told us that the elves were garbage, but with that ability, Potimas seems even more evil than I realized.

He was such a piece of shit that it even showed in his abilities.

That's crazy, though...

"So in a roundabout way, Ms. Oka is the reason our hometown got destroyed?"

It's not Ms. Oka's fault at all, but I still feel weird about it.

"There is that, but your presence there was a factor as well."

"Huh? It's our fault?"

"No, I wouldn't describe it as your 'fault' per se. This was the border between the human and demon territories, as you recall. Once the war broke out, it would soon become a battlefield, and your clan would have surely perished. It is true that the situation with Missoka hastened its destruction, but there was also the goal of getting you two reincarnations out of the war zone and into a safer area as soon as possible, before the war began. Nor could we allow you to encounter Missoka, who was gathering the reincarnations under the elves' control."

"What...the hell? That's...I don't even..."

My words won't come out right.

What is he saying?

That we're also to blame for our clan getting wiped out?

I guess he let me and Asaka live because we were reincarnations, too.

"Ha-ha. What, are we reincarnations angels of death or something, then?"

"As I said, that tribe would have been caught up in the war and destroyed sooner or later, no matter what."

Merazophis addresses me almost comfortingly as I laugh bitterly.

Stop it.

Don't be nice to me when you're supposed to be the target of my revenge...

"That is the long and short of the situation at that time."

Merazophis concludes his explanation.

Just as we were warned, I feel decidedly unpleasant after hearing all that, but

it made a lot of sense, too.

Now I finally know why someone ridiculously strong like Merazophis would suddenly attack our settlement without warning.

I spent years wondering where he came from, and why.

Not to mention why our clan was the target of such sudden destruction.

Now those questions have finally been answered for me.

Even if part of me suspects I was better off not knowing.

“...As you see, we had our reasons for doing what we did. But it does not change the fact that I personally destroyed your home and killed your friends and family. You have every right to despise me.”

With that, Merazophis stands.

“I cannot apologize, nor can I willingly offer you my life in penance. But I will not turn away a challenge from you, either. I will fight you whenever you wish.”

Just like that, he leaves the room.

Was he being considerate of us?

Were those final words an attempt to motivate me out of my obvious depression?

Seriously, I don't want my supposed mortal enemy to be nice to me...

“...I came here to find out the truth so I'd know what to do next, but I've never felt more unsure, dammit.”

Asaka silently puts her hand on my shoulder.

The mugs that Merazophis poured for us are already empty.



Interlude

KENGO NATSUME

Once Yamada and his crew took off, I left the house right after.

The rest of my former classmates probably had no idea how to deal with me.

I could figure out that much from their distant attitude when I was talking to Yamada and the others.

If Issei was there, maybe I would've still made an effort to talk to 'em.

But as it stands, I couldn't be bothered.

The moment I gave up on this world for good was when Ms. Oka told me that Issei was dead.

This was right when we met with her at the academy.

Ms. Oka was reluctant to answer my question, but I stubbornly pushed until I got a response, only to regret it immediately.

Issei Sakurazaki was my best friend, practically my other half.

As soon as I learned that he was long gone, the world lost its color.

"Excuuuse me? Where do you think you're going?"

Shinohara comes running up behind me.

"Huh? What, did ya need somethin' from me?"

"Hmm? Oh, no, not really."

"Then what do you care what I do? Leave me alone."

"...But I'm afraid if I do that, you might die."

I snort at that. "I'm not gonna die. I'll stay alive for ya as long as you lot don't kill me."

"...Well, good."

I keep walking.

But Shinohara silently follows me.

...Don't tell me she's actually worried about me, in her own way?

After everything I did?

Ha! This one's as big a softy as her owner.

"Listen... How did you end up like that, anyway?"

Unable to bear the silence any longer, Shinohara asks me point-blank.

"You guys were all born into pretty cushy circumstances, and you had friends close by. I don't just mean Yamada. Even the ones who got captured here had food, shelter, and friends who knew what they were goin' through, yeah? ...But I got no one."

In the end, it all comes down to that.

I was very lucky in my previous life.

I had everything I could've wanted.

I didn't want to be reincarnated into some stupid fantasy world.

At that point, I woulda been better off dead.

"The empire is dead rotten on the inside, did ya know? All those damn pigs tryin' to use me as their puppet to get a taste of the good life, hidin' their ugly ambitions behind their smiles. Not that they fooled me for a damn second! So I was surrounded by greedy pigs, all tryin' to suck up to me. Not a damn soul I could talk to. No one I could trust. After a while, it seemed stupid to try stayin' sane in a place like that."

The empire hasn't been a place of nobility for a long time now.

Its military nobles turned their backs on my father, the sword-king, to chase the shadow of the previous ruler, while the imperial nobles of the court took advantage of the situation to line their own pockets.

If it weren't for the common enemy of the demons, they would've all ripped each other apart by now.

And I'm supposed to be the prince of such a shitty country?

I never asked for any of that!

Who the hell is “Hugo Baint Renxandt”?!

I just wanted to keep being Kengo Natsume, dammit!

So then I made up my mind.

I decided this was all just a bad dream.

If it's a dream, I can do whatever I want, right?

I can mess everything up and do whatever it takes to get out of this nightmare?

And if that didn't work, I had no reason to even go on living in this shitty world.

The most I could hope for was a little fun.

Otherwise, it was still just a goddamn nightmare.

That's how I saw this world.

“Y'know, though, when I met Ms. Oka and the rest of you people, I was actually pretty pumped.”

I really was happy to see other people who knew about our old world.

“But when I saw you fittin' into this world just fine and havin' a great time, I got kinda pissed.”

Why are these guys being so damn positive?

They're just accepting that we gotta live in this world now?

Well, I couldn't accept it.

Maybe if Issei was still alive, I would've felt differently.

If he was here, I bet he would've put up with my whining, saying stuff like, “You're soo hopeless, Ken,” but still accepting me as I am.

Maybe then I would've felt better and managed to move forward.

But Issei isn't here anymore.

“It's like what they say about the greatest hate comin' from love or whatever.

I felt betrayed, then that turned into hatred. The reason I hated Yamada the most was 'cause he seemed like the heart of your little buddy-buddy group."

We were both princes.

Why did my life go so differently from his?

It's not fair.

He could at least get a taste of the suffering I've gone through.

"Pretty stupid, right? You think even less of me now?"

"Mm-hmm. Honestly, you were just taking out your frustration on others."

"Yeah. That's exactly goddamn right."

I look over my shoulder and meet Shinohara's cold stare.

But I don't even care what anyone thinks of me anymore.

I don't care about anything at all.

Not even whether I live or die, at this point.

"Well, first of all, you know."

"Hunh?"

Shinohara puts a hand on my shoulder, then violently flips me to the ground.

"Hmph!"

"Oogh?!"

You gotta be kidding me!

She keeps smacking me around like it's no big deal!

"We'll just have to beat that twisted personality right back into shape! And I'll keep beating you up even after it gets better, for the rest of your life!"

"...What the hell? The rest of my life? Is that some new kinda proposal?"

"Hmph!"

"Guh?!"

Seriously, stop hittin' me like that!

...Damn, that hurts.



Interlude

YURI

“Miss Phelmina?”

Returning to my room, I turned to the young lady who had followed me inside.

I have met Miss Phelmina on occasion since the time that I was brainwashed.

Now, I was aware that she belonged to an organization quite separate from the imperial army, but who would have imagined that it was the demon army?

I suppose when one is brainwashed, one becomes quite oblivious to such things.

Thus, I must learn from my mistakes by observing everything from all angles!

“Was everything Shun said earlier true?”

I peer into Miss Phelmina’s eyes as I inquire.

She leans back a little as if to avoid me, but I bring my face that much closer.

“...Erm, you’re a bit too close.”

“Answer me.”

“I will answer you. Just, could you please step back first?”

Miss Phelmina breaks our staring contest to turn her face away.

Trusting that she will indeed answer me, I retreat a single step.

It is ever so important to be trusting and faithful, after all.

“...Just so you know in advance, I can only tell you what I’ve heard from Master and the Demon Lord and such. I cannot confirm whether all of it is true.”

Phelmina sighs and adjusts herself before continuing.

“We have no way of proving whether the current state of this world, the system, and the events of the past are all accurately conveyed.”

“Of course.”

When she puts it that way, I realize she’s right. Neither of us can prove whether what we’ve been told by others is true.

In our prior world, there was ample information on the Internet, but much of that was of questionable accuracy as well.

In fact, we had no way of knowing if even the information we were taught in school was all true.

It isn’t as if we witnessed these historical events for ourselves, nor have we personally seen the atoms that we learned about in chemistry.

I am beginning to feel that knowing what is true and what to believe is in fact quite important.

“But if that’s all right with you, I’d be happy to share what I have been told, if you would like?”

“Please do.”

“Very well.”

With that, Miss Phelmina told me everything she knew.

She seems to be quite good at explanations: The main points were easy to follow, and she refrains from peppering in her own opinions or emotions as she speaks.

Thus, I can easily accept everything she says.

“That’s just about all I know.”

“I see. Thank you.”

Once she finishes, I tilt my head back toward the heavens.

Ah, my mind is such a mess of information, I have no idea what to do with any of it.

At times like this...

“Huh? Wh-what are you doing?”

Miss Phelmina exclaims in shock, but this sort of thing really calms me down.

Essentially, I scratched myself with my fingernail.

Yes, across the wrist.

“We need to stop the bleeding! No, wait! Healing Magic!”

Miss Phelmina promptly closes the wound, but the trickle of blood and memory of pain still linger.

The coldness when my nail broke the skin helps me regain my composure.

Then the pain and spreading warmth of the wound reassure me.

I haven’t done it in such a long time, but I did it quite often in the past.

Since there is Healing Magic in this world, it needn’t even leave a scar.

<Proficiency has reached the required level. Skill [Pain Mitigation LV 8] has become [Pain Mitigation LV 9].>

“Ahh...”

I can hear a voice.

The Word of God!

“That’s right. No matter what the truth might be, God will still speak to us! I can hear the voice of God!”

I reach up toward the sky.

All I can see is the ceiling, but I still stretch toward what lies beyond it!

“My faith is right here! God! O God!”

God is real.

I can hear God’s voice.

I don’t know what is or isn’t true, but this is the one fact that I shall never doubt!

Even if the Word of God church was built on ostentation and lies, my faithful heart is realer than ever!

I needn’t have doubted anything!

From the very beginning, I already had my answer, and my faith never once

wavered!

“Let us pray! Let us rejoice! O God! In the name of God! Lady Sariel! Aah, Lady Sariel!”

Aah! It’s such a thrill to be able to speak that blessed name!

How I wish to share this joy with another!

“Miss Phelmina! Please, join me!”

“Huh?! Um, I, n-no thank you...”

Awww...



WORLD QUEST

It all happened so fast.

Shortly after Black and the Demon Lord made amends and the mood started to lighten...

The Demon Lord's face became serious again, and at the same time, Vampy and Mr. Oni gave a startled look into empty space and posed as if listening carefully.

Let me tell you, I had a bad feeling about this already.

I ordered my clones to hack the system right away.

There, I took a peek at the Divine Voice (temp.) message logs.

Judging by the way these three were acting, I had a feeling the Divine Voice (temp.) had issued some kind of revelation or something.

And boy, was I right.

Uhh, what's this now?

World quest activated.

An evil god is plotting to sacrifice humanity in order to prevent the destruction of the world. You must either prevent this plot or assist with it.

...Ughhh, damn that D.

Way to throw a wrench into my plans!

Aaaargh!

Seriously, gimme a break! Thanks for nothing!

I figured she'd probably get involved somehow, but I wasn't expecting such big, bold interference.

This "evil god" thing is referring to me, right?

But D's the only evil god around here! What a jerk!

I mean, I kinda suspected that D wouldn't find it very fun to let things continue like this.

So I was expecting something like this to happen.

But still, even if it's not a total surprise, that doesn't mean I can't be pissed about it.

If someone said "I'm gonna punch you right now! Here goes!" and you braced yourself to be punched, and then they really did punch you and it hurt, I bet you'd still be pissed, right?

My ideal scenario would've been to keep working behind the scenes until I got the results I wanted.

Long story short, if I could destroy the system without anyone noticing, I'd win.

By the time people realized what was happening, the system would be gone, and yeah, maybe a ton of them would die in the process, but at least the world and the goddess would presumably be saved.

For the biggest victims, aka most of humanity, it would be like a massive disaster happening out of nowhere...but for me, that's the easiest and best-case scenario.

But would D really let things go down that easily?

Yeah, no. Of course not.

In gaming terms, that'd be like if the final boss went sneaking around behind the scenes, never giving the player the slightest hint of what's happening, until they suddenly get a game over.

Who would wanna play that?

At the very least, you'd have to include hints like "The final boss is up to something! You better stop them or else!"

Then the heroes would stand up to thwart the evil boss's plans!

You can't just set a time limit without ever telling the player, letting them go

on some unrelated adventure until they suddenly get a GAME OVER. That's just bad game design.

Sure would be easier from the final boss's point of view, though.

Why should the boss have to give a hint to the heroes, who might very well try to stop her?

Obviously it's better to just go about your evil schemes without letting anyone know.

Games are waaay too unfair to the villain characters, if you ask me.

And while this world has stats and other gamelike features, it's still reality.

Does it really have to work like a game, then?

So I sneak around behind the scenes.

Bwah-ha-ha, by the time you realize what's happening, it'll already be too late!

At least...that's how I was *hoping* this would go...

This world isn't a game, it's true.

But it *does* have a god who's basically the game master.

Not to mention a huge pain in my butt.

And now, like it or not, it's got all the makings of a game's final stages.

Fine, then.

If I'm the final boss of this game, who's going to fight against me?

First of all, the pontiff.

The pontiff strives to protect people, specifically the human race.

He's basically the guardian of humanity.

Since I'm trying to cause harm to humanity now, he'll definitely oppose me.

There's no point trying to convince him otherwise.

It's impossible to bend that man's will. The Demon Lord once described him as "freakishly determined."

He's a tough old geezer who's lived enough lifetimes that you'd be better off trying to debate a brick wall.

The worst thing about the pontiff is that, on top of the fact that he'll definitely oppose me, he also happens to have one of the Ruler skills: Temperance.

These Ruler privileges, which come with the Seven Deadly Sins and Seven Heavenly Virtue skills, are the keys to the secret self-destruct feature of the system.

By opening all these Ruler keys, you can make the system destroy itself.

Theoretically, I could pry open some of those keys by force.

But the truth is that I have no idea what sort of negative repercussions that might have later.

So I want to play it as safe as possible by collecting all the Ruler keys.

The fact that one of them is definitely on the enemy side is nothing short of infuriating.

If I want to get the Temperance ruler privilege, I'd have to either talk the pontiff into handing it over to me or turn him into a dead man.

Aaand like I said, I can't talk him into squat!

So that's the pontiff's fate decided.

The other person who's definitely gonna oppose me is Balto.

You know, the guy who's been the Demon Lord's aide all this time?

Surprised?

You shouldn't be.

Balto's been going all out for the demon race his whole life.

His methods might differ, but he's not unlike the pontiff or Agner, who worked just as hard for the demons.

Balto only obeyed the Demon Lord because he deemed that the best choice for the demon race as a whole.

If he learns that the existence of all demons is on the line, he's sure to resolve

himself to fight off the threat, aka me.

He already made the tough choice to go to war against the humans and sustain massive casualties, as opposed to challenging the Demon Lord and getting his race wiped out entirely.

...Although he'll probably get an ulcer in the process.

So, the pontiff and Balto.

The representatives of the human and demon races are definitely gonna try to stop me.

In other words, I'm basically making an enemy of the majority of mankind.

Although considering that the best word to refer to all humans and demons in combination is "humanoids," I think it's pretty clear which representative is gonna be the biggest pain to deal with.

But there's one person who's gonna be a much bigger problem than any of them—or all of them combined.

"Hrm..."

That person is right in front of me, turning his gaze upward and heaving a long sigh: Black, also known as Administrator Güliedistodiez.

He remains facing the sky as he speaks to me.

"...I suspected that it might come to this. If you destroy the system, this world will be saved. I do not think that proposal of yours for salvation is false. And yet..."

Black trails off for a moment and turns to look steadily into my face.

"There was never any way that this doomed world, only a step away from destruction, could be completely saved without any sacrifices being made."

He stands up slowly.

The Demon Lord and Mr. Oni rise as well, looking tense.

Vampy? I mean, she's still all tied up in my thread, sooo...

"Ariel. As far as what we were discussing before, I can only go on atoning as I

always have. I will continue to devote myself to simply carrying on Sariel's will. That is all I have ever done, and all I shall ever do. Therefore..."

He turns away from me for a moment to look at the Demon Lord.

"If anyone attempts to trample on Sariel's wishes, I shall not allow it, no matter who it might be. You still intend to go through with it, do you not?"

The Demon Lord answers without a moment's hesitation.

"Yeah. We've made up our minds. I'm sorry."

Her instant response speaks volumes to her determination.

"Do not apologize. If anything, I ought to instead. Once again, it has only come to this because of my own failures."

Black smiles, gentle and a little sad.

"Sorry."

He's been apologizing nonstop this whole time, but that one felt like it contained the heaviest meanings and emotions of all.

Then he breaks off from all that, his expression going blank, and turns away from the Demon Lord to face me again.

"Do you remember what I once told you?"

Uh, you're gonna have to be a little more specific than that.

"If your actions lead to results that run counter to mine, then you shall likely find me standing in your way."

I don't think he knew what I was thinking, exactly, but Black proceeds to repeat the statement he was referring to.

It's something he said to me when Sariella and Ohts were at war, or more specifically, after the Demon Lord showed up there and we had a throwdown.

At the time, the Demon Lord and I were enemies, and Black lent a hand to the Demon Lord just that once.

Then, once I survived that, he came to apologize to me.

While he was at it, he asked me to stop meddling with the Demon Lord.

I shot him down at the time, but then he got all depressed about how he couldn't do anything.

I felt kinda bad, so I told him, "You should do whatever you feel is best." (Seems like the kind of advice a certain evil god would give, in retrospect.) That seemed to put some pep back in his step, but then he gave me the warning that he's repeating now.

"It appears that time has now come."

...Yeah, I figured as much... Damn it all!

Black and I move at almost the exact same time.

He charges straight toward me, raising his fist.

Mr. Oni tries to get in his way, but he's not fast enough.

Not even an *oni* can keep up with the speed of a real-deal god like Black.

That goes double for the weakened Demon Lord, who can't even react in time.

In those precious milliseconds, I was busy doing whatever I could.

Not about Black, specifically, but about various other things.

Naturally, that means I'm too preoccupied to react to Black's attack immediately, and his fist goes right through my chest.

His arm pierces all the way into where my heart should be.

Any normal person would be dead already.

"I know this alone is not enough to kill you."

But naturally, a god like Black isn't stupid enough to think he's finished me off that easily; he starts in on a follow-up attack.

Instantly, the scene around me rearranges itself.

We're on a road in some strange, slightly futuristic city.

The Demon Lord and the others are nowhere to be found.

In fact, even though this looks like an urban area, there's no one else around at all.

He teleported us.

No, we're probably not in the same world at all but on a battlefield constructed in some separate dimension.

Like the home where I keep all my mini-me clones.

Black throws me down onto the hard road of this unnatural space.

Gah!

Even for a god, having my body broken like this is causing significant damage.

Especially since I'm still a fledgling god myself.

Getting my heart crushed obviously did some major damage.

Not that I'm gonna die or anything!

...Actually, if you really think about it, I went through all kinds of injuries before I even became a god—getting torn into shreds, floating around as a disembodied head in the ocean, all that jazz. By comparison, getting my heart pierced isn't even that big a deal, is it?

At any rate, I'm totally fine with this degree of damage.

That doesn't mean I enjoy getting beat down like this, though!

Ugh! This guy's merciless!

But I guess I always knew it was probably gonna come to this eventually.

It's just a matter of priorities, and ours happen to be very different.

The Demon Lord and I care more about the goddess's ongoing existence.

Black and the goddess care more about the goddess's wishes.

We're trying to save the goddess's life and ignoring her wishes in the process.

He's trying to respect the goddess's wishes, even if it means letting her disappear.

Since our goals are in direct conflict, we were bound to clash.

Man, what a pain, though.

The goddess is the one who's making the biggest mess of all this, y'know?

Here we are, trying to save her life, yet she's trying to sacrifice her whole existence for the sake of mankind and all that crap.

The person we're trying to rescue doesn't even want to be saved.

Plus, our method of saving her is sacrificing most of mankind, in direct opposition to her wishes.

Of course she'd get mad about that.

What we're trying to do probably does seem evil from an outsider's perspective.

But we're still gonna do it.

Because that's what the Demon Lord wants.

She's the one who decided to do it, even if it means turning the whole world against her, even if the person she's trying to save would hate her for it.

And why shouldn't the Demon Lord have someone on her side?

So I made up my mind and all, but come on!

This still seems awfully harsh, dude!

Sure, I figured I was probably gonna have to fight Black eventually, but I wasn't expecting it to happen so soon!

Gimme some more time to get ready here, will ya?!

You realize I'm still running around dealing with the aftermath of the battle with the elves, right?!

How am I supposed to be fully prepared if you come at me with such inconsiderate timing?!

Damn you, D!

Always trying to put me at a disadvantage!

I roll to the side just in time to avoid being crushed by Black's leg.

It makes a crazy *BOOM!* as it crashes into the ground where I was just standing.

Cracks form in the perfectly level ground below.

But I can't assume it wasn't so bad just because the ground didn't smash to pieces.

We're in a dimension of Black's creation.

If I assume the laws of physics work the same way here, I'm in for a world of pain.

I'm guessing my bones would've been broken to splinters if that hit me.

Still rolling away, I catch my hands on the ground and hop to my feet.

The giant hole in my chest has closed.

Any god worth her salt could instantly regenerate from a wound like that.

But still, time out for a second!

I lean back and just barely manage to dodge Black's fist as it flies toward my face!

A perfect Ina Bauer!

Or maybe it's more like *The Matrix*!

Either way, I let my hands hit the ground for a flawless bridge pose!

Then I shimmy away like that, *The Exorcist* style!

What, that's creepy?

Like I've got time to worry about that!

Black, buddy, you could at least hold back a little!

You turn on me the second D sends out that stupid world quest thing, then toss me into your own territory and attack me before I can even stand up?

It's no fair if the stronger guy pulls something like that!

If you know you're better than I am, you could at least have the decency to be overconfident, like everyone's favorite golden king!

You're not even a king, you're a freaking god!

While I'm scuttling away, Black catches up to me instantly and kicks me in the back, sending me flying upward.

GWOOMPH!

Um, I don't think bodies are supposed to make that sound!

Hello?! This might actually be bad news!

As my body goes sailing into the air, Black's fist strikes again.

It goes straight through the center of my chest, piercing through me just like before.

Ha-ha-ha.

So much for the defensive barrier I put up...

I guess this is no laughing matter.

This situation is getting even more serious than I thought.

My limbs feel as slow as if I'm moving underwater, and I can't seem to defend myself, either.

I think the former is because this is a field Black created.

As long as the master of the field is here, I won't be able to use my full strength.

And the reason my defenses aren't working is that Black's barrier is canceling mine out.

He's got the realest kind of Dragon Barrier, the one only actual dragons can use: an overpowered barrier that cancels out all kinds of conjurings, no exceptions.

As a defense, it can nullify any attack conjurings; as an attack, it can break right through the enemy's defenses, like he did just now.

Seriously, it's straight-up cheating.

No fair.

He's got this super-OP cheat power, and he's using it with perfect precision to try to kill me.

Even though I'm far from perfectly prepared myself!

Man, I can't deal with a superior opponent who doesn't let his guard down

due to hubris.

I always figured that if the time ever came for a final showdown with Black, I would lure him into my own territory first thing, but now he's beaten me at my own damn game?

No waaay.

Ugh.

Okay, complaining won't get me anywhere.

I guess I've got no choice.

This isn't even remotely how I hoped it would go, but that doesn't change what I have to do.

Just gotta beat Black down and put my world-restoring plan into action.

"Hrmm."

I grab Black's arm—which is still pierced through my chest, by the way.

At the same time, I transform my lower body into spider form and slash at him with my scythe-shaped front legs.

Black shakes free from my grip, yanks his arm out, and jumps back.

The effects of this field slowed my scythes, making them easy to dodge.

Even if they had hit, he probably would've been fine, thanks to his Dragon Barrier.

I guess that means he's being extra cautious of me.

Luckily, that put some distance between us—even if that doesn't mean much, since this is Black's territory.

A field created by a god is basically an extension of that god's body, after all.

It gives him an advantage and me a disadvantage.

As long as we're in here, he's always gonna have a leg up.

That doesn't mean I'm gonna take it lying down, though.

White spiders begin crawling up out of my shadow.

Tons and tons of them.

As each spider appears, the field warps around us, like they're eating away at the space.

"Not a chance!"

Black raises a fist and charges, but the white spiders scatter before him.

Of course, I jump back to avoid his attack, too.

The scattered white spiders call in more spiders, and those bring in even more.

White spiders keep multiplying all around us.

And all of them are eating up the field Black created.

"So many..."

Heh-heh-heh!

Did you think I was just getting beaten up for no reason?!

...Okay, yeah.

I was getting my butt handed to me pretty good.

But, I was also putting my clones into action, making arrangements for them to break into Black's field!

The hole in my chest closes again.

Whew. Now the real fight begins!

I have no memory of getting beaten up this whole time!

"Tch!"

Black scowls.

He keeps trying to attack my main body, but I'm steadily retreating, keeping distance between us.

His attack speed and my retreat speed are evenly matched.

My body isn't slowed down like it was before.

A battle between two spatial conjuring masters is sort of like a game of

Othello.

It's all about expanding your own territory and preventing your opponent from expanding theirs.

And right now, my white spider clones are taking over Black's field at a remarkable rate, turning it into my own.

Bwah-ha-ha-ha-ha!

I didn't perfect my abilities for nothing, y'know!

Bow before my extremely specialized skills!

As Black keeps speeding after me, I avoid him by retreating at equal speed.

Meanwhile, the clones keep summoning other clones, overwriting Black's territory.

I'm relieved to see that my command of spatial conjuring seems to outmatch his.

If it didn't, I wouldn't stand a chance in this battle.

I've got to at least be able to hold my own in spatial conjuring or I'd already be screwed.

You can tell how important and nasty fields are by how badly I was getting beaten down when I first got dragged into this field.

It's basically like buffing yourself and debuffing your opponent.

If you've got no way to fight back against that, you're going down in no time.

Which is why spatial conjuring is a crucial ability for gods.

This is all just the prerequisites to try to fight a powerful god, though; I've basically just made it to the starting line.

If I didn't have equal or better skills in spatial conjuring, I wouldn't be qualified to fight him.

I'm glad mine are better, but that still basically gets canceled out by all the damage I took from his initial attack.

Since he got the first move, I'm behind on developing my own field.

While I'm managing to take over his field now, it's not as fast as I'd like it to be.

I've got to be prepared for a long fight if I have any hope of taking over the whole thing.

So on that note, my current situation is still reeeeeally bad.

I assumed from the start that I would be as good or better at spatial conjuring, and I was right about that.

But I've taken more damage because he got the first move; instead of luring him into my territory, we started off in his.

On top of that, Black is stronger than I am.

For me to defeat a stronger opponent, I've got to get the home field advantage in my favor.

Since I haven't managed that, I'm in trouble.

"Hrm?!"

The thread strung between buildings twines around Black's body.

My clones put these spiderwebs here in advance.

And it's no ordinary thread, of course.

I used spatial conjuring in the process to make the thread virtually impossible to cut.

Once you've gotten caught in this thread, there's no getting out.

Or at least, there's not supposed to be...

Black waves his arm casually.

That alone is enough to break through my prized threads and destroy them.

Damn that cheat barrier!

My threads are made with conjuring, so they don't work on Black's Dragon Barrier, which erases any and all conjurings.

I knew that going in, but I was still hoping I'd get to see an all-powerful god getting stuck in a spiderweb and flailing around helplessly. No such luck, huh?

Well, that was really just a bonus, with the main goal being to buy a little time.

In the mere seconds that the thread distracts him, I put more distance between me and Black.

For right now, my top priority is buying time until I can turn Black's field into my own.

Fighting back can wait until that's done.

In fact, it's gonna have to, because I don't have a second to spare for that right now!

I don't have many tricks up my sleeve, after all.

Honestly, I think I'm probably underqualified to be a god.

I've got spatial conjuring, clones, and Evil Eyes.

That's pretty much it.

So I create my home field with spatial conjuring, hide in there, and use my countless clones to drown the opponent in Evil Eyes.

I don't have much else in the way of attack methods.

Part of the problem is that I didn't have much time to learn any other ways to fight a very real, very powerful god.

I mean, I'm a newbie god who just got deified recently. The only way I can take on a big veteran god like Black is to pick one single thing to focus on and hopefully beat him at.

If I started busting out every half-assed trick in the book, I figured it would all amount to nothing.

So I decided to focus on my specialties, spatial conjuring and Evil Eyes.

Thing is, it's a bit of a gamble.

I've basically only got the one attack method, Evil Eyes, so if he finds a way to neutralize that, I'm pretty much doomed.

I don't think it's the kind of thing you could cancel out that easily, but it's not

impossible.

So when I fought Potimas's weapons, I tried not to let him see my moves.

As a test, I have one of my clones use Evil Eyes on him.

"Ngh!"

Oh? Did it work?

Judging by his reaction, it doesn't look like Black has any way of blocking my Evil Eyes.

That's certainly a relief, but I need my clones to focus on overwriting the field right now. I can't waste time using Evil Eyes.

That first move really made a huge difference.

Now my home and my Evil Eyes are both out of reach, putting me on the defensive.

But on the flip side, that also means that even though I'm at a major disadvantage, I'm still managing to hold my own.

Sure, I got my butt kicked at first and lost a ton of magic in the process, but I was able to get back on my feet easily enough.

Honestly, the fact that I didn't take more damage feels like a stroke of luck, given that I figured a single hit might even kill me.

Black's attack power isn't as high as I thought.

And since he's still trying to get up close, he must not have any powerful long-distance attacks, either.

I guess Black is more of a defensive-type god, with his Dragon Barrier and all.

Gods are totally unfair by nature.

Like, even if you manage to hurt them, they'll fully recover in no time flat.

Even my body has already healed from the damage Black did.

So doing anything to physically hurt a god is really difficult.

Whether you crush their heart or blow their head off, they'll just go right back to normal.

But of course, even a god will lose the power to think for a few seconds if they lose their head.

Unless they come prepared in advance to automatically recover.

I've got a counterstrategy for that kind of thing myself, so I'm sure anyone who calls themselves a god does, too.

There are only a few methods for defeating a god like that.

You can break them down broadly into two categories: wearing them down, or shattering their souls.

The best examples I know of the latter are Heresy Attacks and Abyss Magic.

Leave it to D to casually build in skills that could defeat a god.

That wasn't very cash money of her.

What the hell was she thinking?

Anyway, that method is way too advanced for me.

Yet D is out there letting people who aren't even gods use it.

That wasn't very cash money of her.

Seriously, what the hell was she thinking?

I had to say that twice, because it's very important.

A soul is the very core of a living being.

Even a god can't go on living if their soul gets destroyed.

It's like the true form of a god, really.

So that's the basic flow of a fight between gods.

Get a way to destroy your opponent's soul and a way to keep them from destroying yours.

Figure out a method that works on them and find an opening to use it.

At least, that's how it's supposed to be.

But widdle old me can't do thaaat.

I basically became a god through some weird cheat code, leaving me without

any special secret powers.

So my only available method is the other one: wearing them down.

Wear down what exactly, you ask?

Energy, of course.

That's the driving force for any god.

If the soul is a god's heart, energy is a god's blood.

They use it to perform all kinds of miracles.

Instantly healing a fatal wound is one such use of energy.

Naturally, if they run out of energy, they can't do that anymore.

In other words, they'll die.

Thanks to my Evil Eyes, I specialize in stealing that energy.

I slowly whittle away at my opponents, like poison working its way through their body.

But see, there's just one problem with this method...

Like, "god" is basically just a being with a crazy amount of energy stored up, right?

And like, I've gotta suck all that energy dry, right?

It's gonna take a ton of time, isn't it?

Yeah, you know it.

This wearing-down method takes a reeeeeeally long time.

Plus, Black has that damn Dragon Barrier.

I don't think it can block my Evil Eyes completely, but it's bound to slow down the effects.

Plus, I'm still busy preparing my base for that plan.

Black doesn't have the firepower to take me down in one hit, either.

All this can only add up to one thing: an extremely drawn-out battle.

We're basically starting an endurance marathon to see who runs out of strength first.

Oof. That's no fun...

How many days is it gonna take for this to end?

No, it might even take months...

Probably not years, or at least, I sure hope not.

If it did come to that, I can guarantee I'd be the first to crash.

I gotta set things up so Black's the one to go down.

The reason I was working so hard before I got tossed into this dimension was that I knew this battle was gonna take ages.

Since I'm gonna be totally preoccupied with this fight for a while, I wanted to hurry up and finish everything else I needed to take care of first.

Although I ended up letting Black get the first move because of that.

Plus, since I was in such a hurry, I pretty much just dropped the rest of my work in everyone else's lap.

But there's nothing else I can do now except hope they can handle it.

I'm worried, of course, but I don't have a second to spare thinking about it.

After all, my opponent is Black, the strongest god in this world by a wide margin.

He's the strongest opponent I've ever faced, too.

Frankly, it was probably a bad idea for a fledgling god like me to take him on.

But ever since I became a god, I've been training for this moment.

Don't you dare assume that I'm gonna go down easily.

It's no exaggeration to say that the outcome of this battle will affect the course of the entire world.

All right, let's settle this once and for all, Black and White!

...I better set my backup plan into motion, though.



CHANGE OF SCENERY

Suddenly, I found myself someplace unfamiliar.

“Ngeh?!”

I was so surprised that I blurted out a strange noise.

Huh?! Where am I?!

I was with Katia in one of the homes in the elf village just a second ago...

...and now, I'm on a sandy beach by the ocean.

The chair I was sitting in loses its balance in the unstable stand and falls backward.

Even in this situation, my well-trained body automatically reacts in time to keep me from falling with it, at the very least.

But what good does that do?

Even if I didn't take a tumble, I still don't have the slightest idea what's going on here.

Standing next to my fallen chair, I stare blankly at the waves.

It's the ocean.

The elf village is in the Great Garam Forest, deep inland.

It would take more than a few days to get to the coast from there.

And yet I wound up here in the blink of an eye.

I reach to the top of my head.

There, I feel something.

When I pick it up and bring it in front of my face, our eyes lock.

It's a white spider.

I remember feeling something drop onto my head right before I arrived here.

None of my skills were able to detect it in advance, leaving me startled when I felt it land.

The next thing I knew, I was here.

This spider must be the culprit.

As for what it's doing now, it's just frozen in place.

It appears to be alive, but it's as if its battery is dead.

I poke it with a fingertip and get no response.

"Do you understand me?"

I try talking to it, too, but it doesn't respond to that, either.

If this is my only clue, I don't see how I'm ever going to figure out how I ended up here.

I turn my attention away from the stubbornly unresponsive white spider, looking at my surroundings again.

In front of me is nothing but water.

The ocean stretches as far as the eye can see, without an island or coast in sight.

When I turn around, I see a forest beyond the beach.

I can't tell how deep it goes beyond the trees at its edge from here.

But it can't be very small, since I see more trees when I look left and right.

"...Uh-oh."

I was already at a loss for what to do, but now I'm even more confused in a more literal and immediate way.

...For now, let me get my thoughts in order.

Before I wound up here, I was talking to Katia.

She was telling me about what happened after I passed out yesterday, and I was telling her about Taboo.

While we exchanged information, I was hoping I might get an idea of what to

do next.

Then we heard the “Word of God.”

<World quest activated.> <An evil god is plotting to sacrifice humanity in order to prevent the destruction of the world. You must either prevent this plot or assist with it.>

Katia looked surprised, too; evidently I wasn’t the only one who heard it.

I was similarly startled by the unexpected event.

You only hear the Word of God at specific times, like when you level up or gain a skill.

I’ve never once heard it announce anything like a quest.

Could this be the first time it’s happened in history?

At the very least, I’ve never heard of the Word of God making an announcement about a quest or something along those lines.

I would think anything that unusual would be recorded by the Word of God religion.

Although I suppose it’s possible such history could’ve been erased.

Considering that the Word of God has completely eliminated anyone with the Taboo skill in order to keep the information it contains from spreading, I wouldn’t be surprised.

But there’s certainly been no “world quest” in the time I’ve been alive, and I’ve never heard anyone from older generations mention it. This has to be an unusual event.

Even if there has been a world quest at some point in the past, I doubt it was within the past several decades.

Which means something extreme is going on.

...And yet.

“I guess I’m literally being excluded...”

I got teleported here right after that so-called world quest went out.

Just as I was being surprised by the world quest, this white spider landed on my head and surprised me even more, and then I found myself in this unfamiliar place for the biggest surprise of all...

At this point, I've gone beyond surprised to dumbfounded.

But I can't just stand around in shock forever.

The fact that I was teleported here must have something to do with that world quest.

It seems like a natural assumption, timing-wise.

But who did this, and why? I can't say for sure.

I do have some idea about the "who," though.

Assuming this white spider did indeed teleport me here, it must've been the work of its master.

Its pure-white color reminds me of someone.

A girl as white as snow flashes across my vision.

Even Julius wasn't a match for her—it wouldn't be too surprising if she caused a situation like this.

But it seems a little hasty to assume that she's this spider's master just because it's white.

I'll just consider it a theory for now.

I certainly learned my lesson today that it's dangerous to jump to conclusions and act without knowing the whole story.

...That's right.

I really don't know anything.

There's far too much I don't know.

So I've got to learn everything, one step at a time.

At least, that was the plan...

But I don't think I'll be able to do even that in this situation.

I've been thrown into some unknown place, alone, with no idea how to get back.

...Actually, am I even going to be able to survive like this?

Since I was dumped here so suddenly, I don't have anything but the clothes on my back.

I've got no weapons, and nothing to eat.

If I don't have food or water, won't I die in just a few short days?

I'd better find a way to get both.

But I have no way of knowing if there's anything edible in that forest...

The thought quickly makes me nervous.

I can't just stand around here in a daze.

I've got to do something.

"Hmm?"

Just then, I think I hear something faint in the distance.

I listen carefully until I'm sure of it.

Not only that, but it seems to be coming right toward me.

At a fairly rapid speed, too.

"...Brotheeerrrrrrrrr!!!"

"Wah?!"

Now, I don't think I did anything wrong by automatically dodging the shape that came flying at me from within the forest.

Once the would-be assailant landed face-first in the sand, I cautiously approached.

"...Sue?"

"Yes! It's your beloved younger sister, Sue!"

For some reason, my previously missing sister Sue was right in front of me.

I had a lot of questions, but Sue insisted that we "needn't stand around out

here” and led me away.

She told me that the house where she was living was right nearby.

I wondered why she would live in a place like this, but sure enough, there was a clearing not far into the forest with a single house.

Even though none of it made any sense, I figured Sue would explain soon enough, and I followed her into the house at her request.

“Welcome to our little love nest.”

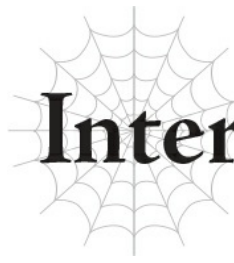
Sue muttered something strange as we entered. At this point, though, my mind was so completely blank that I didn’t bother asking what she meant.

I had so many questions and points of confusion that I figured it could wait until later.

Little did I know that I would regret that decision in just a few minutes.

“Now then, dear brother, you simply must live here with me. For ever and ever. Just the two of us.”

Not long after we entered the house, my sister drugged me, bound my hands and feet so that I couldn’t move, and prepared to take my clothes off.



Interlude

KATIA

Shun disappeared.

Shun...disappeeeeed?!

“Huh?! what?!”

The shock from hearing that world quest thing goes up in smoke.

My mind went blank for a second there, but I quickly come to my senses—there’s no time to waste.

Time to take action.

First, I run straight to Yuri’s room.

“C-can I help you?”

Yuri looks startled that I’ve charged red-faced into her room.

But! I’m here for the other person in the room, not her!

“Shun disappeared! This is your master’s doing, isn’t it?!”

“...Pardon?”

I bear down on the girl in the white robes—I believe her name is Phelmina.

She works for Wakaba and is currently one of the only people left in this building with any ties to her.

I noticed a few other white-robed agents hiding around here, too, but based on the exchange between Wakaba and Phelmina earlier, I think she must be the highest rank here.

I think Wakaba’s people must be behind Shun’s disappearance.

In fact, I don’t see how it could be anyone else.

With those white-clad agents keeping a close eye on him, I doubt anyone could have gotten past them to teleport Shun somewhere unless they were on the same side.

And judging by the timing, it has something to do with that world quest.

The world quest announcement came totally out of nowhere. If the culprit acted after hearing it, they would've had even less time to get past the secret agents.

After all, Shun disappeared right after we heard that world quest thing.

Wakaba and her people have to be behind this!

But we're basically their prisoners of war right now.

I've got to get this Phelmina girl to connect me to Wakaba so we can talk things out peacefully!

"Where in the world did you send Shuuuun?!"

"Yikes, another crazy one..."

Aaaaaah!

In spite of my intentions to remain calm, I grabbed her collar and started shaking her!

Ever since I got the Parallel Minds skill, my thoughts and actions sometimes get out of sync like this.

I suppose that means I haven't mastered the skill yet.

Generally, I keep the Parallel Minds skill turned off, but sometimes it turns on at the slightest provocation and starts running wild.

I imagine this means there are still traces of my more masculine self inside me.

Sometimes my mind and voice alike can get rather mixed up.

Oh, but this is no time to stand around thinking about such things!

All right, stay calm.

I-is it too late to settle things peacefully now, I wonder?

"Oh, dear Katia..."

While I stand there internally screaming, Yuri gently removes my hand from Phelmina's collar.

“If you’re going to grab her, you ought to do it here.”

Then she guides my hand to her neck instead.

“It’ll be fine. If you give a little squeeze here, most people will start talking.”

“I don’t see anything fine about this...,” Phelmina remarks.

...Yuri’s words disturbed me so much that I’ve calmed down.

In fact, Phelmina seems rather calm for someone who’s being grabbed by the throat.

She’s still looking at Yuri coolly, and despite saying that it’s not fine, she hasn’t moved.

Her dignified demeanor is so impressive that I suddenly feel embarrassed at my own panic, and I quickly withdraw my hand.

Phelmina quietly rearranges her disheveled collar.

“...Now then. Would you mind explaining what’s going on here?”

Phelmina’s remarkable composure makes me picture her as a businesswoman dressed smartly in a pantsuit.

Urgh. This is a woman who can get things done!

Even though she doesn’t look that much older than I am!

While I feel strangely defeated, I can’t afford to lose any more face, so I explain the events that just occurred as calmly as I can.

Although there’s not much to tell: We heard the world quest announcement, then immediately a white spider (or something like that?) dropped onto Shun’s head, and Shun vanished.

“A white spider...? Please give me a moment to confirm.”

With that, Phelmina pulls something out of her sleeve: a small white spider.

So this group really was behind it.

“Did you hear that, ma’am? We have a complaint here... Master?”

Phelmina speaks to the small spider, but it doesn’t respond at all.

For the first time, her expression changes, turning a bit paler.

“I’m terribly sorry, but there appears to be an emergency. As soon as I’ve determined the situation at hand, I will explain. Please give me a moment.”

Then, before I can even try to stop her, she swiftly leaves the room.

In addition to her speed, her movements were so smooth that it was as if she slipped through my blind spot.

Even without looking at her stats, I can tell from the way she moves that Phelmina is strong.

I guess she didn’t get agitated about the fuss Yuri and I made because she knew she had nothing to worry about.

She must have concluded that we weren’t a threat, even if we attacked her two against one.

I might’ve been in danger if I was careless enough to antagonize her more.

But thanks to Yuri’s strange statement, we avoided that worst-case scenario.

When I think of it that way, perhaps Yuri actually said such a bizarre thing to bring me back to my senses.

“So how shall we wring the life out of the people who kidnapped Shun?”

No, I take it back. She’s still making disturbing threats with a sunny smile.

“We’re not going to wring the life out of them.”

“Really?”

“Certainly not.”

Yuri tilts her head in confusion; given her lovely features, I have to admit it’s a little adorable, or at least it could be.

But her eyes seem to be missing any highlights...

I can’t put my finger on it, but there’s something unnerving about her.

Yuri always had a bit of a spooky side, but today it feels like her creepiness has been cranked up a notch or two.

...I think I’d prefer not to look into it too deeply.

Let sleeping dogs lie, and all that.

So forgetting about Yuri for now, what shall I do...?

I'm not going to "wring the life out of" Wakaba and her people, that's for sure.

If I even tried, no doubt I'd be the one getting throttled instead.

But I don't wish to simply sit around and wait, either...

"Ah! Shun was teleported away somewhere, right?"

While I'm lost in thought, Yuri speaks up.

"Erm, yes."

"Then I think I know just the right person!"

"The right person?"

"Oh, yes! Elder Ronandt, the master of Spatial Magic!"

"Hrmm. No, I think not!"

Yuri and I were able to meet this Elder Ronandt right away.

As I suspected, Wakaba's side seems to be preoccupied, such that we were able to leave our area of confinement without any trouble.

We didn't know where to find Elder Ronandt, but we happened to run into Natsume and Fei as soon as we left the building, and the former knew his whereabouts.

After all, Natsume is still technically the prince of the empire, and Elder Ronandt is the top imperial mage of the court.

So we asked Elder Ronandt if he could help us go after Shun, but his response was as immediate as it was unfavorable.

"Why not?"

Yuri drew closer to Ronandt.

"You do not know where Prince Schlain is now, correct? Even I cannot help, without the slightest inkling of where he's gone. Though perhaps we could follow his trail if you had an idea."

“So we just need to find out where he is?!”

This time, Fei bears down on the old man, too.

As Yuri and Fei press close to him urgently, Elder Ronandt gracefully steps back and calms them before continuing.

“Even then, we may not be able to follow. Teleportation only works for places that the user has been before. I have certainly visited all manner of places, but if Prince Schlain is somewhere I have never been, then I still cannot help you.”

So we’re out of options?

If the man said to be humanity’s greatest mage, a better Spatial Magic user than anyone, says there’s nothing we can do...

“Ah!”

Just as I was thinking that we’d have to wait patiently like Phelmina told me, Fei suddenly smacks her fist into her palm.

“What about summoning?”

“Summoning? ...Oh!”

After a moment, it hits me.

Fei has a contract with Shun!

Though she’s in human form now, she’s still a wyrm—essentially a monster—considered to have been “tamed” by Shun.

With that contract, Shun can summon Fei at will.

It’s a one-way street, but at least Fei would be able to go to wherever Shun is.

“But are you able to summon yourself to him, Fei?”

“...No, I can’t.”

Well, that’s no help.

It sounds like only Shun can summon Fei from his end, not the other way around.

“If Yamada hasn’t called Shinohara yet, doesn’t that mean he ain’t in any real danger?” Natsume grumbles.

He has a point, but...

“Shun may have forgotten about summoning entirely, I’m afraid.”

Shun has never actually summoned Fei before.

He always treats her like an equal, never like a servant or a familiar.

It’s possible he’s forgotten about the contract entirely, including his ability to summon Fei.

I had forgotten, too, after all.

“Besides, it’s also possible that he’s in such a predicament that he hasn’t had time to think of such things.”

“Would they really do somethin’ so indirect?”

Natsume’s doubts are valid; I also suspect that Shun’s life is not in danger.

If Wakaba and her people wanted to kill Shun, they could have simply done so without bothering to teleport him anywhere.

It’s safe to assume they moved him for some other reason.

“Hrm? You have a contract with Prince Schlain, missy?”

“Mm? Yes, what of it?”

“Hrmmm...” Elder Ronandt thinks for a moment. “Might I Appraise your status for just a moment, then?”

“My status? If you must.”

“Pardon me, then.”

Fei grimaces for a second, probably because of the discomfort that comes with Appraisal.

What does Elder Ronandt hope to find by Appraising her stats, though?

“Summoning... Teleport...hrmm. Perhaps if...oh? Oh! Could this work? Is it possible?”

He mutters to himself as he does goodness knows what.

“Oh-ho-ho! It just might work! It will! But of course! One must never assume

something is impossible! Yes, I can do this!”

Um, hello?!

What’s with this guy, getting all excited out of nowhere?!

“Right here and now! A new chapter in the history of teleportation is about to unfold!”

Elder Ronandt spreads his arms wide.

“If you can be summoned, that means there is a pathway for teleportation there! We can use that pathway to teleport to where Prince Schlain is now!”

Wait, is that really possible?!

So that’s why Elder Ronandt was looking at Fei’s stats!

I guess he really is humanity’s strongest mage.

At first I thought he might be a bit off his rocker, but he’s amazing after all!

“Now then, let us go! To Prince Schlain!”

A moment later, the scenery changes around us.

“Nwha—?! ”

I stumble backward at the sudden turn of events, but luckily, I manage to grab on to something that keeps me from falling.

But when I see what’s happening before my eyes, my relief quickly drains away.

What I grabbed was the edge of a bed.

And on top of that bed is a boy with his arms and legs tied, in the midst of having his clothes stripped off.

A naked boy who happens to be Shun!

And the girl taking his clothes off happens to be his sister, Sue!

“Wh-what in the world do you think you’re doiiiiing?! ” I shriek.

How could I *not* shriek about that?!

“You mustn’t have relations before marriage! First, you must proclaim your

betrothal to God!”

Yuri shouts, too, albeit with slightly unusual logic.

“Besides, you’re his sister! You can’t marry him!”

And now even Fei is flying off the handle...?

And I don’t think marriage is what’s important right now!

“Get away from him! Right now! How indecent!”

I give Sue a hard shove away from Shun.

She topples off the bed and breaks into a roll before quickly getting back on her feet.

“Katiaaaa... Things were *just* getting good... Why did you have to go and... interfere?!”

Her voice isn’t very loud, but somehow, it’s dripping with resentment and rage.

“It’s obvious! Because you haven’t declared your marriage intentions to God yet!”

Yuri, again, that’s not the problem here...

“You know that’s not it, right?! Siblings shouldn’t do something like that, period!”

“Another woman I don’t knooow?! Why must my brother be so faithless?!”

“Whaaa?! Oh, right! You haven’t seen me in this form before!”

Sue blows her lid at Fei.

Come to think of it, Fei didn’t learn to take human form until after Sue had gone.

I suppose since Sue only knows her as a little wyrm, it makes sense that she’d assume she’s a new woman.

Although she might still be angry even if she knew who Fei was.

When Fei was a small wyrm, she was quite close with Shun, staying in his room and sitting on his shoulder and such.

“At any rate, Shun is to declare his marriage with *me* to God, so I’ll be taking him back now.”

While Sue is baring her teeth at Fei, Yuri hops in and scoops Shun up.

“Stop right there! Why should he go with *you*?!”

How dare she take advantage of all this confusion?! What a thing to say!

She’s always tried to convert Shun to the Word of God religion, but now she’s showing her true intentions, it would seem!

Her attempts to convert him were already quite brazen. Does she no longer care what it takes?!

I grab Shun’s arm and try to pull him away from Yuri.

But Yuri latches on to him and refuses to let go.

“Get away from him!”

“Nooo!”

“Brother belongs to me!”

Sue joins in on the tug of war, too.

Shun looks pained as he gets yanked in three directions.

“Wait a minute! You’re going to tear him apart!”

Now Fei has jumped into the battle.

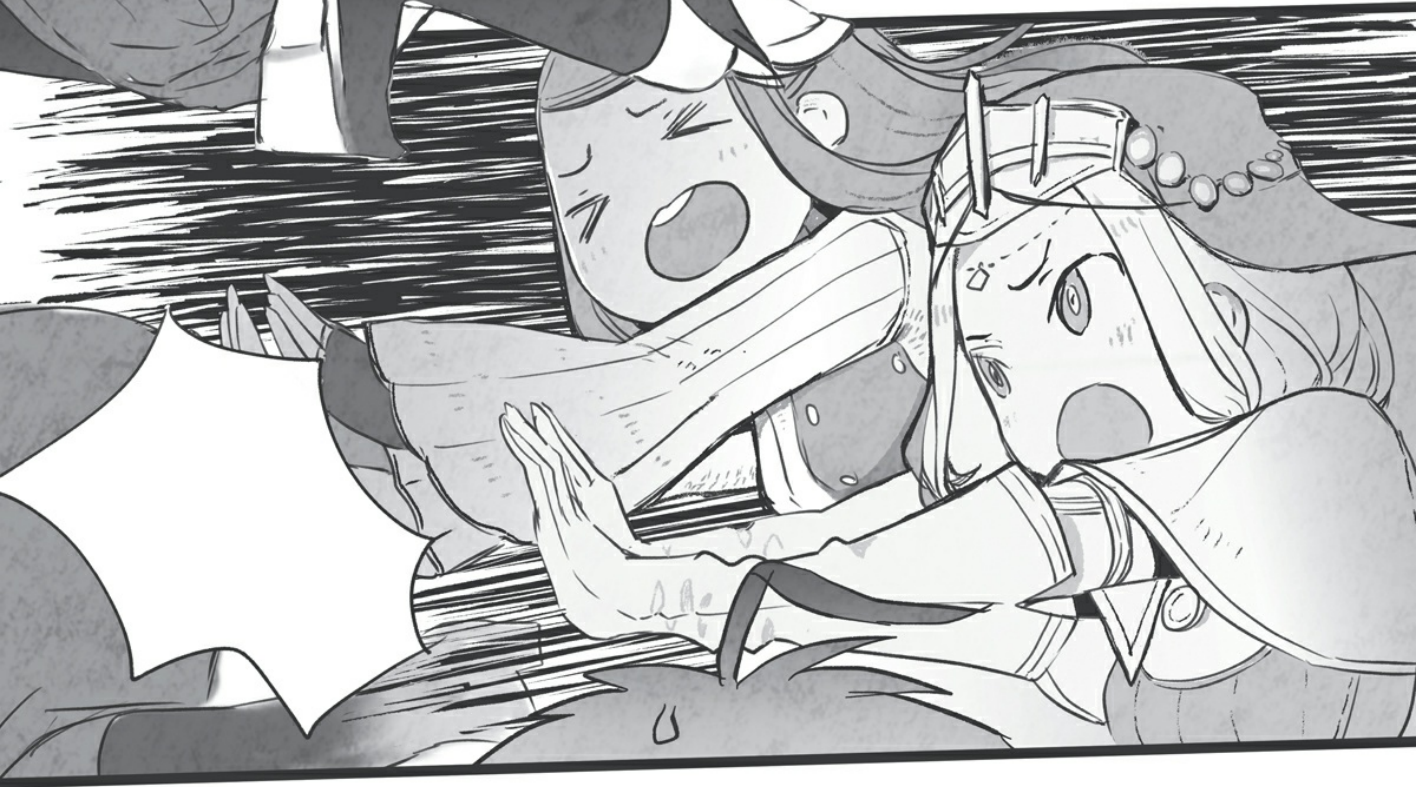
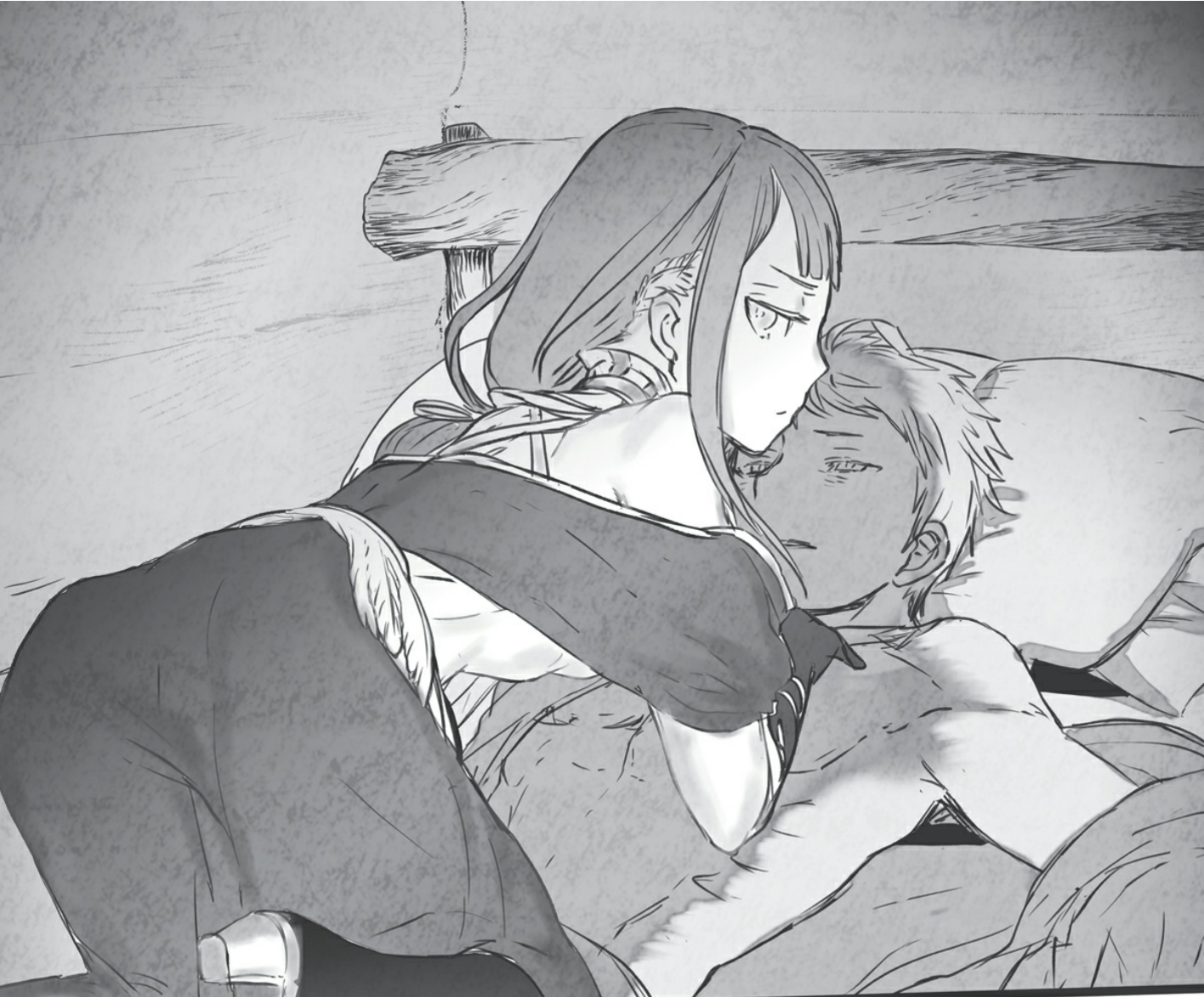
She’s right, of course, but I simply cannot back down!

“...Damn, Yamada. Looks like you’ve had it rough in your own way.”

“Ho-ho-ho. What a popular lad. But you must choose only one, okay?”

Natsume and Elder Ronandt are watching from the sidelines.

Shun looks to them as if pleading for help, but they’re both pretending not to notice.



But since Shun has yet to speak or move on his own in spite of all this, doesn't that mean he's been drugged?

"Sue! You drugged Shun, didn't you?!"

"Just a mild anesthetic! I thought this would make it a done deal, but nooo!"

"Even if it was a done deal, God wouldn't allow it!"

"Aaargh! Enough of this, all three of you! Shun's body is making snapping sounds I'm quite sure it's not meant to make, so let goooo!"

Things were truly getting out of control, with all four of us making a fuss.

But then...

<World quest sequence 1. Installing Taboo in all humanoids.>

We heard the Word of God again.

I'd forgotten all about it in the chaos since Shun disappeared.

But this was a divine revelation far too important to be ignored.

Immediately, an unbearable pain filled my head, and my vision went black.



Special Chapter

THE DEMON LORD LEFT BEHIND

“Sorry, he says...”

I gaze at the spot where Gülie and White disappeared.

I’ve known Gülie for a very long time, yet as he addresses me in what might be our final farewell, his last word to me is...“sorry.”

It’s so typical of him, I can’t help but laugh.

He’s always been like this.

Always looking apologetic, always feeling so responsible for everything that he takes on guilt for things that aren’t even his fault.

Such a stubborn, inflexible, awkward lug of a man...

I just hope this won’t be the last time we meet...

Sparing a small prayer for the safety of my old friend turned enemy, I shift my attention elsewhere.

“Well. Things have taken an unexpected turn, but that doesn’t change our course of action.”

Even if that world quest thing threw a wrench in the works, our ultimate goal remains the same.

Which is to say, we’re still going to bring about the destruction of the system and set Lady Sariel free.

We haven’t laid the groundwork all this time only to stop now.

Although most of that was thanks to White, and she’ll be taking care of almost everything from here on out, too.

That said, Gülie taking White away from us is a serious loss.

“Um, even if our course of action hasn’t changed, what do we do now?”

“I don’t think there’s much we *can* do at the moment...”

Unfortunately, we can’t do anything right away.

There are a few reasons for that.

The first is that there's no telling what's going to happen with this so-called world quest.

It wasn't Lady Sariel who made this announcement.

I can't imagine she would do anything like that to voluntarily meddle with the system, or that she even has the ability to do so.

It wasn't Gülie, either.

So by process of elimination, that only leaves one possible culprit.

It must have been D.

I've never even met this administrator in person; frankly, I can't read her at all.

It would be dangerous to make any moves when we don't know what she might pull next.

I think our best bet is to wait things out and be ready to adapt on the fly.

The second reason is to feel out how the rest of the world is going to react to the world quest.

Certainly, it's safe to assume that Dustin will turn against us like Gülie.

But what is he going to do?

I want to wait and see his reaction before I decide how to deal with him.

It's a much more passive strategy than making the first move, but it's the best I can do.

After all, our original hope was to destroy the system before the likes of Dustin and Gülie even caught on.

And before they realized that the backlash from destroying the system will kill around half of humankind.

If all went well, they wouldn't have realized that until after it was already done.

Then that half of mankind would already be dead, and there'd be nothing

they could do.

Now that the world quest has ruined that plan, it will be near impossible to keep things moving along in secret.

Dustin is sure to make a move; the only question is whether he has any means of preventing us from destroying the system or not.

If he doesn't, we can simply ignore him.

But if he does, we'll have to head him off with all our strength.

That's why I need to wait and watch Dustin's reaction to figure out whether he's a threat.

The third reason is that we've just ended our fight against Potimas, and we haven't even finished dealing with the aftermath yet.

It would be difficult to drop everything and leave here right away, especially with the reincarnations.

And then there's the fourth reason.

This one is the most important of all: White's absence.

White is the one in charge of actually destroying the system, and she's got all kinds of other jobs, too: using her clones to monitor the situation across the world, teleporting us around, and so on, not to mention that she's the one who actually came up with the plan in the first place.

In any event, White carries too much weight in this plan to go on without her.

There are so many things we can't do if she's not here that we're basically stuck, and that's the truth.

I explain all this to Wrath and Sophia.

"So realistically, all we can do is finish dealing with the aftermath of this battle and keep an eye on everyone else."

Basically, all we can do is stick to the original plan.

"I see. That makes sense to me."

Just as Wrath nods, Phelmina comes rushing into the room.

“I have a report.”

“Okay, let’s hear it.”

“Communications with Master have been cut off. Right after the world quest was announced, the reincarnation ‘Shunsuke Yamada,’ also known as Schlain, was suddenly teleported away. A witness stated that a white spider dropped onto his head before he disappeared.”

“That sounds like White’s work, all right.”

I’m guessing the reason communications with White have been cut off is that she doesn’t have the time or energy to spare for that.

If she’s fighting Gülie, not even White would be able to multitask.

But based on this report, she must have made some moves in the short time after the world quest announcement went out, right before her battle with Gülie began.

I do have some idea of where she might have sent Yamada.

“I see. She must have sent him to the love nest ahead of schedule...”

I actually feel a little bad for Yamada.

His half-sister Suresia, also known as Sue...

She was working with us under threat from White, but instead of simply using her, White decided to offer her a reward.

When we asked what she might want, she responded “a love nest where I can be alone with Brother.”

White readily agreed and prepared this “love nest” in some far-off place.

From her perspective, she was killing two birds with one stone: fulfilling Sue’s wish and sending the wild card known as Yamada far away as an added bonus.

Even I don’t know where this love nest is, exactly, but apparently, it’s so remote that it would be difficult to reach civilization from there without teleporting.

Now that she’s put Yamada there, he’s unlikely to make it out before we destroy the system.

Evidently, the place does have a small farm, weak monsters nearby for possible meat, and plenty of edible wild plants, so they won't have any trouble surviving.

Even once the skill has been destroyed and his stats and skills are gone, he should still be fine.

This is all according to White's standards of living, which of course makes me a little suspicious, but Sue and Yamada will have to contend with that themselves.

"There's one problem, though... How do we explain this to Yamada's army of admirers...?"

That Yamada is crazy popular with the ladies for whatever reason...

Even if it's technically a reward for good work, we're still basically presenting Yamada on a silver platter, regardless of his own wishes. I can imagine all too clearly how that's going to turn out.

And I doubt the other girls will be very happy about it.

I mean, we just gave him away in some remote place without their knowledge...

But whether they accept that or not, there's nothing we can do—even I don't know where this love nest is.

All we can do is tell them the truth and let them decide whether to give up or leave no stone unturned in their search for him.

In fact, we're not actually obligated to tell them anything. It might even be better for everyone involved if we cover it up.

"Well, that's the long and short of it. I'll leave it up to your discretion how much you want to tell them, Phelmina. But could you please tell them that his life isn't in danger, at least?"

"Of course."

I drop the responsibility of dealing with Yamada's fan club on Phelmina.

His life isn't in danger, and we don't have time to put too much effort into this

part of the plan anyway.

...Although I suppose his chastity might be in danger, if not his life.

Just then, I notice that Phelmina still hasn't left.

She's an exceptional soldier, who normally acts as soon as she's given orders, but she hasn't moved an inch...

Ah, I know why.

"If it's White you're worried about, she'll be fine."

"I see."

The relief on Phelmina's face confirms my suspicion.

She was worried about White because their communication got cut off.

I guess White's pretty popular, too...

Shocking, I know.

White has been pretty awful to people like Sophia and Phelmina, yet they still seem to admire her.

...Then again, I guess you could say the same about me.

I used to see White as an enemy, but now I've become quite fond of her.

Maybe she's just a naturally charismatic person.

Except everyone but me sees her as silent and mysterious...

I don't think there's anything charismatic about being so awkward that you have to keep all communication to a bare minimum.

Is she a genius at making people admire her, then?

Well, I guess that's a silly thought to have when she's probably locked in a life-or-death battle with Gülie at this very minute.

Here I was, hoping that Gülie won't die, yet I'm not worried about White in the slightest.

But that's only because...

"White is definitely going to win."

I believe that with all my heart.

“So you don’t need to worry about her at all. We just have to do whatever we can on our end and welcome her back with a smile when she returns. It’s our job to keep her work from piling up any more than it already has.”

“Understood, ma’am.”

Phelmina looks relaxed now that her worries have been put to rest.

The situation isn’t actually over yet, but it seems like my words reassured her, at least.

“By the way, what is that thing doing?”

Phelmina’s eyes cool to absolute zero, as if she’s looking at some particularly disgusting garbage.

She’s looking at Sophia, who’s still wrapped up like a pupa.

“Ah... That’s right, I suppose she’s still tied up. What to do...?”

White...

If you had time to think about Yamada, you could’ve at least freed Sophia before you left, too...

A long time ago, when Wrath was wrapped up in White’s thread like this, we were having so much trouble cutting it that we had to set it on fire to get him out, with him still stuck inside...

Based on that example, I’m guessing we won’t be able to get Sophia out unless we set her on fire, too.

“Hmph.”

As we examine her, Sophia gives out a huff and turns her body into red mist, easily freeing herself from her bonds.

Wrath, Phelmina, and I all stare at her with wide eyes.

“You could’ve gotten out on your own all this time?”

“But of course.”

She puffs up her chest, as if stating the obvious. Why didn’t she just escape

sooner, then?

“If I escaped in front of Master, she would have given me an even worse punishment, don’t you see?” Sophia clarifies.

My thoughts must have shown in my expression.

Now that she mentions it, that certainly makes sense.

Considering White’s personality, she would definitely get mad if someone escaped her beloved thread.

No doubt she would have come up with some needlessly elaborate method of ensnaring Sophia even more thoroughly so she couldn’t escape again.

When I think about it that way, she really is such a child at times...

Just as the mood in the room is starting to relax, something else happens.

<World quest sequence 1. Installing Taboo in all humanoids.>

“Huh?”

“Oh?”

Wrath and I are the only ones who manage to respond.

Sophia and Phelmina both collapse, grimacing in pain, even though they both have the Faint Nullification skill.

But thanks to the announcement that preceded this, I already know why.

“Well, that’s a bold move...”

I guess D doesn’t do things halfway, either.

Installing Taboo in all humanoids...

That’s the information that the Word of God religion has worked so hard to hide.

But this will render all their hard work moot in a matter of seconds.

Ha-ha... Yikes!

Boy, what I wouldn’t give to see Dustin’s expression right now!

The Word of God church must be in an uproar, or at least Dustin himself must

be.

Most of the other humans have probably collapsed just like these two.

Only people who have already maxed out their Taboo skill, like Dustin, Wrath, and I have, will be unaffected.

The greatest strength of Dustin's Word of God religion is that it's a huge organization.

While Dustin is an exceptional leader, there's only so much he can do on his own.

His power comes from being able to command such an enormous group, with believers all over the world, as he sees fit.

But right now, most of the humans who make up that organization are unconscious, due to the Taboo installation.

In other words, the Word of God church is more or less out of commission.

Naturally, that means Dustin's defenses will be weakened, too.

This is the perfect chance to take him out.

Now, killing Dustin normally wouldn't make much difference.

Thanks to the effects of his ruler skill, Temperance, he reincarnates with all his memories intact after he's been killed.

It takes a few years for him to come back after dying.

Then it takes several more years for his new body to grow, but while he's gone, the massive organization of the Word of God will fill the hole left by his absence and keep the world in its proper state.

Dustin's absence creates a large void, but not so big that it can't be filled.

It's small wonder that Potimas could never destroy the Word of God organization.

Even without Dustin, their strength is scarcely affected.

But this situation is different.

If Dustin disappears at this crucial moment, the Word of God religion will

become a headless, directionless mob.

Not only that, but it'll create an opening for the ruler skill, Temperance.

We could clear up one of the all-important keys for destroying the system.

It wouldn't end up in our hands necessarily, but this would at least even out a situation that's currently to our disadvantage.

So this would be the perfect time to take Dustin down.

...But unfortunately, I have no way of doing so.

The only way we could make contact with Dustin right now would be through White's teleportation...

Our truce with Dustin was only temporary until we defeated Potimas.

Now that we've finished that fight, White's white-robed subordinates who were there as liaisons have already withdrawn from Dustin's side.

Like Gülie, we knew that Dustin would oppose us if he found out the cost of destroying the system.

It would be like leaving pawns on the enemy side, which would be pointless as long as we have White.

I'm sure White could have easily erased Dustin herself, if need be.

His actual strength is no different from the average human's, after all.

But since White is gone right now, we have no way of getting to Dustin.

It's a perfect chance, yet I have no choice but to let it slip away.

Maybe we should have left someone in Dustin's camp in case of a situation like this?

But we needed all hands on deck to fight Potimas, too...

Oh, well. I suppose there's no point regretting what's already done.

We might be missing a golden opportunity, but the installation of Taboo for all of humanity isn't a bad deal for us, either.

If anything, it might work out in our favor.

The contents of Taboo could easily shake the foundation of the Word of God religion.

I imagine Dustin's closest associates have been informed about it, but the average priests and believers don't know anything, of course.

Once they awaken, the Word of God church won't recover—it'll only get more chaotic.

Perhaps Dustin will be able to settle them down in a short period of time, but it'll still prevent him from reacting right away.

So it would be great if we could take advantage of this chaos...

But we still don't know what developments the world quest will bring next, you know?

It said "world quest sequence 1," after all.

That means there will be a "2," and maybe more beyond that.

It's very concerning that we have no idea what those might entail.

Especially when the first one was a large-scale move like installing Taboo information in all mankind.

The others might be just as big.

In fact, it's probably best to assume they will be.

This is D we're talking about, after all.

The Taboo installation alone is going to have untold consequences for humanity.

Once they all awaken, I can easily picture the hellish scenes of pandemonium that might unfold.

I wouldn't be surprised if "sequence 2" forced all these panicked masses to start killing each other or something equally insane.

That would actually be ideal for our purposes, but I doubt it'll be that easy.

So the best plan for now is to watch and wait.

Really, there's nothing else we can do.

We can't take very quick action in the elf village from here, anyway.

With White gone, our mobility is greatly limited.

It's a painful reminder of just how convenient her teleportation abilities are.

Although even if White were here, it would probably be a tall order to move the remains of the demon and imperial armies, plus the reincarnations, all in one go.

If we could do that, things wouldn't be so...hard?

It's at this moment that I remember exactly where I am.

I'm on the spaceship that Potimas created.

A giant vessel that was designed for a long journey to search for a habitable planet, complete with residential quarters and manufacturing facilities.

Couldn't this spaceship accommodate everyone who's left in the elf village?

And since Potimas activated it yesterday in order to escape when he knew he was about to lose the battle, that means it has already accumulated enough energy to travel.

"Miss Ariel, I'm going to check on things outside. If everyone fainted all of a sudden, someone might have gotten injured."

Wrath's voice pulls me out of my reverie.

"Ah, good point. That may be necessary."

Now that he mentions it, it's very possible that someone could've hit their head when they fell unconscious.

They might have been carrying something heavy and gotten trapped underneath, or even passed out in the middle of washing their face and drowned.

"At any rate, we shouldn't just leave them all lying around. Let's take this opportunity to carry them all aboard."

"Aboard?"

"Mm-hmm. Aboard this ship, that is."

I give a slightly mischievous grin, and Wrath looks surprised for a moment, then nods with understanding.

“I get it. That’s a brilliant idea.”

“Right?”

Wrath’s sharp intuition is very useful at times like these.

Even if I get the feeling White also takes advantage of that usefulness.

“I’m going to stay here and figure out how to make this ship move. Wrath, you check up on everyone and start carrying the men aboard. For the women, Fiel should be hanging around outside somewhere.”

For some reason, Fiel’s been hanging around an old man from the imperial army by the name of Ronandt.

It’s a waste to have her just messing around at a time like this, so I might as well put her to work to make up for it.

“All right.”

“Thanks. I know it’ll be a lot of work, but I’m counting on you, okay?”

Wrath smiles wanly as he leaves.

Now then...

“All that being said, I’ve never even driven a car. Am I going to be able to operate this thing?”

We’re about to find out whether or not I can fly a spaceship.



S5 AN EVER-CHANGING WORLD

“Nngh... mmf. Urgh...”

I hear a groan and look over to see Elder Ronandt wincing as he wakes up.

“Good morning. How are you feeling?”

“Hmph! Not very well, I must admit.”

Elder Ronandt drags himself up from the floor with a muttered “heave-ho.”

Something called the “world quest sequence 1” went into effect not long ago, installing Taboo into all people.

Because of that, Elder Ronandt and everyone else here but me all lost consciousness.

I was probably excluded because I had already maxed out Taboo.

However, since Sue had drugged me with something before that, I couldn’t move, either, until the poison left my system.

For a while, I had to just lie there while everyone had fallen to the floor.

Once I regained my ability to move, I went around repositioning everyone who was unconscious.

I felt bad leaving someone as old as Elder Ronandt on the floor, but there was only one bed. Hopefully, the towels I put underneath him were good enough.

If you’re wondering why I couldn’t put Elder Ronandt on the bed, it’s because that was already occupied by the girls.

Namely, Sue, Yuri, and Katia (I wasn’t sure whether I should include that last one, but there was just enough space for one more).

Maybe I should’ve put Fei there instead of Katia, but there was a weight-related issue there.

Although she’s in human form, Fei is really an enormous wyrm.

Her weight remains the same as it was in her original form, in spite of her

appearance.

If I had put her on the bed, it might have broken.

We're lucky she didn't transform back into her original form and crush us all when she fainted. Instead, I set her up on the bed like Elder Ronandt.

Considering the huge size of her wyrm form, she never would've fit into this room. I imagine a wall might have gotten broken down or something.

Natsume?

He's on the floor, of course.

"How long was I out...?"

"About half a day."

Elder Ronandt stretches, producing some crackling sounds from his back and hips.

...I guess it really was a bad move to leave an elderly person on the floor.

But I couldn't very well put him in the bed with the girls, either...

"Erm... I'm sorry about that. Putting you on the floor, I mean."

"Hmm? Oh! That's perfectly fine."

When I apologize, Elder Ronandt glances at the bed and immediately understands, giving a loud cackle.

"Why, on the front lines, I was camping on the ground just about every night. I'm happy just to have a roof over my head."

"That's impressive. But couldn't you have teleported home to sleep if you really wanted to?"

"It would hardly be fair to get a comfortable rest in my own bed while my comrades sleep on the ground, eh? Besides, I wouldn't be able to help if something happened overnight."

"Ah, of course. That was foolish of me."

"Well, it wouldn't be a bad option to ensure that I stay in tip-top shape so I can bring my best to the battlefield, eh? But when you only think of efficiency,

you lose sight of other things.”

“That’s good to know.”

Really, there’s so much I don’t know that we never would have learned in the academy.

“You’re such a diligent student, just like Julius. But a youngster like you will have plenty of chances to learn...or perhaps not, in this day and age...”

Elder Ronandt trails off with a sigh.

“What do you think is going to happen now, Elder Ronandt?”

“Why, I haven’t the slightest. These recent events are beyond the scope of even my understanding.”

If Julius’s former teacher and the head mage of the imperial court doesn’t know what’s going on, I doubt anybody does.

“I should very much like to speak with you some more, youngster, but at the moment I wish to focus on this ‘Taboo’ business. You’ll have to excuse me a moment.”

“Oh, okay...”

“Don’t you worry, I’ll be right outside. If there’s any trouble, you need only call for me.”

“All right.”

Elder Ronandt leaves the building with a grim expression still on his face.

He probably wants to be alone to look over the contents of Taboo for himself.

Will he be all right?

Just having Taboo hits you with an intense, invasive thought.

“Atone.”

Even if the Taboo menu isn’t open, the thought never stops echoing.

And when you do open the menu, it becomes even stronger.

Just looking at it for a short while was enough to make my face go pale with nausea.

That's in spite of the fact that I'm a reincarnation who came from another world.

I think I've been able to fend off the thought because, in a way, I'm an outsider.

But will the people of this world who are directly connected to all this be able to bear that overwhelming demand for atonement?

There's something called Reincarnation History on the Taboo menu, too.

If natives of this world look at the beginning of that history, their lives from when the system was first created, I worry that they might be overcome with guilt.

Over the past half day, I checked my Reincarnation History and found it was empty.

I'm guessing that if you're from this world, it shows a record of all your previous lives.

Since I'm not originally part of this world, I have no way of knowing how much detail is shown to those who are native inhabitants.

But the contents of the other options like System Header Descriptions and Update History were jam-packed with details, so I suspect there will be a fair amount of information.

It's one thing if it's just a list, but if it actually brings back memories from previous lives, that would be another story entirely.

It could even affect people's current personalities.

Even with the same soul, one's personality is likely to change, depending on where and how you were born and raised.

...I'd hate to see Sue suddenly go down the wrong path.

Actually, though, maybe it's a little too late for her already?

If anything, maybe remembering her previous lives would make her a little more sane...

But maybe it's wrong to put my hopes on something like that. Besides, should

an older brother really think that about his little sister?

As my thoughts go on in circles for a while, Sue actually wakes up.

She still doesn't get up from the bed, though.

"Elder Brother. May I ask why I am tied up?"

"Why don't you put your hand over your heart and think about it for a while?"

"I'm afraid I can't, since my hands are bound."

"You can still think about it, though, can't you?"

It's no big deal. Sue's arms and legs are tied down right now.

I wasn't trying to get revenge for earlier, but it didn't seem wise to let her move freely, either.

The idea of a brother tying up his half-sister probably makes me sound deranged, but considering that she did the same to me earlier and even drugged me on top of that, I don't think you can blame me for being cautious.

"...Go on, then."

"What do you mean, go on?"

Sue blushes and flutters her eyelashes at me.

I really don't like where this is going...

Obviously I would never do anything evil to my half-sister, tied up or not.

What now, though...? If it wasn't already painfully clear when she drugged me, it's even more obvious now that something is wrong with my sister.

I mean, her obsession with me was always a little unhealthy, for sure.

But she still had the good sense to recognize that some lines shouldn't be crossed between siblings...at least, I'm fairly sure.

She did, right? I certainly hope so...

At any rate, whatever good sense she had is definitely gone now.

Is this a temporary change, or is it permanent?

If this is just a temporary state of confusion, I can handle it.

But if it's permanent, that's a problem. A big problem. A *really* big problem.

Why does such a major personal crisis have to come up right now, when a crisis on a global scale—the world quest—is already ongoing?

When you look at the big picture, I'm sure this problem of mine seems small.

But for me personally, it's a very serious family matter.

I probably can't put this off...

If anything, this is happening now because I put it off for so long already.

I've known for a while that Sue had feelings for me beyond the love of a sibling.

She made it so obvious that it was practically impossible not to notice.

And yet I kept putting that problem on the back burner, pretending I didn't see it.

Because I didn't know what else to do.

I mean, think about it.

In my old life, I was a totally ordinary high school boy, the kind you'd describe as "average" or "a background character."

I didn't have an adorable little sister or an adorable childhood friend, let alone a girlfriend.

It's not that I didn't have any female friends at all; there were some girls I could talk to, like Yuri's former self, Yuika Hasebe, but definitely no prospects of getting into a romantic relationship.

What I'm trying to say is that I really have no understanding of the finer points of male-female relations whatsoever.

So for someone like me, the idea of a half-sister who's in love with her older brother sounds like some far-fetched fantasy fiction.

I don't even know how to deal with girls under normal circumstances, never mind a younger half-sister from a different mother.

As far as I know, I've always treated Sue like a younger sibling, nothing else.

But since I was an only child in my previous life, I have no way of knowing if I was playing the role of an older brother correctly or not.

Judging by Sue's current state, I'm guessing I must have gone wrong somewhere.

I do think that she might have imprinted on me because we were together constantly from a young age.

We were raised together for as long as I can remember.

And ever since childhood, like a true *isekai* character, I've worked hard to acquire more skills.

Apparently, Sue thought of me as "cool" because of that and started getting attached to me.

It wasn't so intense when we were little, though.

Since Sue and I were raised in a fairly unique environment, we had very few chances to interact with other kids our age.

In Sue's case, she almost never met any other boys besides me.

So I figured that once we started going to school, and she got more chances to meet other boys, she'd naturally start losing her attachment to me.

Surely she was just mixing up familial love with romantic love, a minor problem that would correct itself when she entered puberty, all the more so once she developed other crushes.

But this plan failed spectacularly, and Sue remained attached to me.

She started acting a bit distant around that time, so I thought she was finally starting to drift away from me, which was a relief, even if it was a little bit sad. Now, though, I realize how horribly wrong I was.

Her acting distant must have been because she was working with Wakaba's side in secret.

And in the end, that led to her having to commit the horrible act of murdering our father.

I don't know what kind of scars that left on Sue's heart.

But judging by the way she's acting now, it was clearly even more serious than I thought.

If I had tried to check in on her when she first started acting distant, maybe things wouldn't have gotten so bad.

Maybe if I had faced her head-on, instead of being wishy-washy because I didn't know how to handle her, I would've noticed sooner that something was wrong.

Whether that might have helped me get ahead of Wakaba and the others doesn't matter right now.

I didn't notice that something strange was going on with Sue.

That's clearly a failure on my part.

Even so, I can't reciprocate Sue's feelings.

"I can't return your feelings, Sue. But I can still stay by your side...as your older brother, nothing more. Is that not good enough?"

I know I'm probably letting her off too easy.

I'm not a saint, you know.

Part of me wants to interrogate her about why she was working with Wakaba.

And an even bigger part of me wants to interrogate her about why she drugged me, tied me up, and tried to do who-knows-what to me!

But if I do that to her while she's emotionally unstable, I'm afraid I might do irreparable damage.

But it wouldn't be right to give her what she wants, either.

It wouldn't be good for her or for me to try to pacify her by doing something like that.

Even if it would satisfy her feelings in the moment, a twisted relationship like that would be bound to end poorly.

And then Sue would get hurt even more.

So I have to set my relationship with Sue on the proper path, right here and

now.

As a normal brother and sister.

I look right into her eyes as I wait for her answer.

Just as the prolonged eye contact is starting to get awkward, Sue abruptly turns away.

“...You can be so cruel, Brother.”

And without another coherent word, she bursts into tears.

I made her cry.

Wh-what do I do?

I have no idea what the right answer is, but I feel like if I run away now, we'll be right back where we started.

So I cautiously reach out my hand and pat her head.

While this might not be the right choice, it seems worse to just stand here in silence.

So I keep patting her head until she stops crying.

...Incidentally, it seems like Katia woke up at some point during all this, but she politely pretended that she was still sleeping.

She even went so far as to put a sleeping spell on Yuri for us.

Otherwise, if Yuri woke up, I'm sure she wouldn't be nearly as polite...

<World quest sequence 2. Influence the battle between gods by way of prayer.>

“There it is...”

Around when Sue stopped crying—or to be more precise, when she went on crying for so long that I began to suspect she was faking it, then became increasingly certain, and was just starting to seriously debate whether I should hit her with an iron claw move instead of continuing to pat her—there was another world quest announcement.

It gave me the perfect excuse to remove my hand from Sue's head and step

away from her.

I immediately sensed that she was disgruntled, which confirmed my suspicions that she'd started faking it partway through.

I can't believe she took advantage of my kindness at a time like this...

Maybe I should've taught her a lesson with a little iron claw to the face after all?

Once I move away from Sue, Katia sits up innocently and wakes Yuri, who rouses from her magic-induced sleep with a start.

While we wait for Yuri to fully recover, I open the Taboo menu and check it again.

【Taboo Menu System Overview

System Header Descriptions

Update History

Points List

Reincarnation History

Special Option n% I = W

World Quest

There's a new option at the bottom of the menu.

I guess it just got added because the world quest assumes prior knowledge of Taboo.

Since "sequence 1" installed it in all humanoids, "sequence 2" probably created this new "World Quest" option in the menu so that everyone can read up on it.

I cautiously open the World Quest header.

<Currently, the goddess Sariel, who serves as the core of the system, is in danger of disappearing under the overwhelming burden. The ivory god aims to destroy the system, use the energy that was running the system to complete the restoration of this world, and free the goddess Sariel, preventing her disappearance. However, in choosing this method, approximately half of mankind will die as a side effect of the destruction of the system, and their souls will be destroyed. The ebony god has deemed this unacceptable and challenged the ivory god to battle. If the ivory god wins, half of humanity will be sacrificed, and Goddess Sariel and the planet will be saved. If the ebony god wins, Goddess Sariel and her successor, the ebony god, will be sacrificed, and humanity and the planet will be saved. By offering a prayer to one of these two gods, mankind can send a small amount of power to the god of their choice.>

"What in the...?"

I can't believe what I've just read.

It's so shocking that I don't know what to process first.

"So it's like a final battle...or should I say a final ballot?"

Katia must have read the contents of the world quest header, too.

A final ballot is the perfect way to describe it.

Each of us is supposed to pray to either the white god or the black god, and send them strength.

These “ballots” will break the tie in power between the two gods.

“So our options are to save humanity, or save the goddess?”

And the fate of the world hangs in the balance.

Do we save mankind, or the goddess?

It’s up to us to choose who will survive and who will be forsaken.

The goddess Sariel became a sacrifice to save this world, her body slowly wearing away all this time.

The ebony god has been protecting this world for her sake, attempting to carry on her will.

This world, and the people in it, owe these two gods an enormous debt of gratitude.

And now, we’re being given the choice to either save those two gods, or save ourselves.

“But...both of these choices are horrible!”

No one should have to choose between either of these!

No matter which you choose, the loss is simply too great.

“Isn’t there any way to save both?! There has to be!”

“Clearly, we’re in this situation because there is no other way.”

I turn around with a start to see that Elder Ronandt has returned.

“I do not know how much power these gods might have. But I know all too well how little power people have. We humans are weak.”

“So you’re saying we’re not strong enough to change this situation?”

“Indeed I am.”

That sends me into a rage.

“Brother Julius would never have given up!”

If my brother Julius was here, I’m sure he wouldn’t give up even at a time like this.

So how can Elder Ronandt, his old master, say something so cowardly?

“Right you are, youngster. But Julius is dead.”

Those words make me feel anger and despair, but at the same time, it also makes sense.

I’m sure Julius never gave up, not even in his final moments.

But he still died without ever achieving his goals.

My brother often spoke of wanting to create a peaceful world where everyone can live happily.

But even he couldn’t make that dream a reality.

“Human beings are pitiful little things. Try as we might, there is a limit to how much we can do.”

I grit my teeth and bow my head.

Elder Ronandt is right.

It was barely a day ago that I realized how truly powerless I am.

“But there is still the option of refusing to give up until we die, just like Julius did.”

“Huh?”

I raise my head.

“Humans are weak. Even if we don’t give up, we cannot change much. This situation is no different, eh? I doubt refusing to give up will change anything at all. It would only mean dying in vain. But it is true, all the same, that we will never know for sure unless we try. Will we assume we can do nothing and give up, or keep on struggling until the end, unafraid of a meaningless death? What will you do, hmmm?”

Elder Ronandt looks at me challengingly.

“You already know my answer.”

I gaze back at him steadily.

I swore that I would follow in my brother Julius’s footsteps.

And Julius never gave up.

“Good answer.”

Elder Ronandt grins, a mischievous expression that belies his age.

“Then let’s begin the strategy meeting, shall we?”

I’m not going to give up, either.



Interlude

DUSTIN

Here in the Holy Kingdom of Alleius, the headquarters of the Word of God religion, the administration is in more chaos than ever before.

We have mobilized all our users of Fartalk, the advanced version of the Telepathy skill, to make contact with our Fartalk users who are deployed in other lands.

This is how the Word of God has spread its information network across the world; generally, it is used such that word makes its way back to me if anything has happened, but today it is the opposite.

My goal this time is to use the network to disseminate information.

"I care not what sophistry it takes! Use any means necessary! We must persuade the populace to offer their prayers to Lord Black Dragon, the ebony god! Raise a mob if you must, whatever it takes!"

The Fartalk users shout these messages with spit flying from their mouths.

We have that so-called world quest to blame for all this.

Or perhaps to thank, I suppose.

When "sequence 1" distributed Taboo to the entire population, I was deeply distressed.

Once they saw that information, they would realize what the Word of God religion was doing.

And then they would surely be disillusioned with the Word of God.

I had long since prepared for the possibility of the church losing its authority.

Based on the reason it was founded, and everything it has done thus far, it was always bound to fall in one way or another.

But it is far too soon for that now.

I cannot afford to lose the church, my greatest power, not yet.

The Word of God church must carry on at least long enough to see the outcome of Lord Black Dragon's fight.

The "world quest sequence 1" completely ruined my hopes of that.

But then "world quest sequence 2" showed me a light at the end of the tunnel.

I cannot do anything to stop the downfall of the Word of God church.

But the masses are still in confusion.

All this time, the Word of God has been a foundation of unshakable faith for its believers.

Soon enough, they will turn away from us, but right now they are yet willing to listen.

This is a race against time.

I must convince as many people as possible to pray for Lord Black Dragon before their hearts harden toward the church.

Once enough time passes, the confusion settles, and the people calm their minds, they will surely censure the church for trying to induce them so, but I always knew that the church would one day fall.

It is only happening somewhat sooner than expected; that is all.

Certainly, I would not have chosen this as the ideal time to be forced to let go of the asset I call the Word of God religion.

But I shall simply have to make the best of it.

"Your Grace!"

One of the Fartalk users comes running over to me with a grave face.

It is clear at a glance that he does not bear good news.

"Is there a problem?"

"Yes. I'm afraid a church has been destroyed by someone."

"So one population has already resorted to such measures..."

I was expecting as much.

When people feel betrayed by something they trusted, they are possessed of a powerful hatred.

The stronger their attachment, the deeper their anger becomes.

So what might happen when they learn that they were betrayed by the church they once turned to for comfort, the basis of their beliefs?

It is all too easy to imagine.

“No, Your Grace. It seems it was not a matter of the masses forming a mob.”

“What?”

This answer I was not expecting.

What in the world happened, then?

“An enormous flying saucer appeared overhead, and the church was destroyed as it passed, I am told.”

“...So that is how it is.”

A giant saucer that flies through the air.

There is only one person who possesses such a thing.

Or at least, there was, I suppose.

Potimas Harrifenas.

This must be a weapon of his creation.

And now that he is dead, the only person who could have requisitioned that weapon is the one who defeated him: Lady Ariel.

It follows, then, that Lady Ariel is the one who destroyed the church.

“Your Grace!”

Another Fartalk user calls out to me.

“Was your church destroyed by a flying saucer as well?”

“Y-yes...”

“And the location?”

I confirm the towns where the churches were destroyed, and I compare their

locations on a map.

As I do so, more and more reports of the same nature arise.

It moves quite quickly, then.

I should expect no less of a weapon created by Potimas.

Though it pains me to admit it, he was an exceptional talent.

“...So it makes straight for the Great Elroe Labyrinth, does it?”

Upon calculating its trajectory, I find that the flying saucer is headed directly for the world’s largest labyrinth.

It appears to be destroying any churches it happens to pass over in the process.

Yes, only as it happens.

Destroying the churches is not her main goal, only a means of inconveniencing me in some trifling way.

Ariel’s true intention is to reach the Great Elroe Labyrinth before my people can do so.

Aside from the battle between gods, the World Quest menu described one other method of preventing the ruin of the system.

<The destruction of the system can only be accomplished through the system core room deep within the Great Elroe Labyrinth. The ivory god has already begun preparations for this destruction; the only way to prevent it is to defeat the ivory god, or for those who hold ruler privileges to access the security keys within the system core and implement an emergency shutdown.>

In other words, someone with a ruler skill must personally travel deep into the Great Elroe Labyrinth.

I have one such ruler skill.

The surest way would be to go myself.

It appears that Lady Ariel understands this as well.

That must be why she is making her way there ahead of me, to prepare to intercept me.

She must have determined that I was geographically closer.

At this rate, Lady Ariel and her entourage will no doubt reach the Great Elroe Labyrinth first.

I suppose it was a failing on my part to delay my departure because Lord Black Dragon is currently occupying Lady White, who has complete command over teleportation.

...No, perhaps not.

At that time, I did not yet understand Lady Ariel's true aim.

While I had my suspicions, I could not afford to betray her while we were still cooperating in order to take down Potimas together.

There is no point in regretting that now.

At this point, it is all too clear that Lady Ariel will arrive at the Great Elroe Labyrinth before me and take up a position there to intercept my forces.

I must deal with the situation at hand first.

"What is the situation in the areas where a church has been destroyed?"

"It seems there are whispered suspicions that it might be an act of divine punishment."

Yes, I suspected as much.

I can scarcely blame the masses for reaching such a conclusion upon witnessing something beyond human comprehension, like a flying saucer destroying a church at a time like this.

Lady Ariel is speeding the decay of their trust in the Word of God, if only to torment me.

"What should we do? At this rate..."

"...Have the priests in those locations declare that they are supporting the ivory god."

“Pardon?”

The Fartalk users stare at me in disbelief.

But this is the only option at hand.

We are far past the point of being scrupulous, even if some might think me wicked for it.

In the areas where people are losing faith in the Word of God religion more quickly, what will happen if the priests declare their belief in Lady White?

Surely many of them will rebel by praying for Lord Black Dragon instead.

“Bid them give speeches that will incite the masses to a furor. And have them invoke the name of the ivory god as they do so.”

What will happen to the priests who give such speeches...?

But no, it must be done.

Perhaps sensing my determination, the Fartalk users begin to relay my message.

...I am sorry.

The fault is all my own.

Yet that is precisely why I must carry out my duty fully to the very end.

If Lady Ariel is to arrive at the Great Elroe Labyrinth first, then so be it.

I shall press on to ensure that as many prayers are given to Lord Black Dragon as possible, even if I cannot outmaneuver her.

After all, I did run in a presidential election and win, so very long ago.

None can outmatch me when it comes to collecting votes.



Special Chapter

THE DEMON LORD MAKES HER MOVE

“Ha-ha-ha, look! The people are no better than garbage!”

“Miss Ariel, that’s the villain’s line...”

“Sure, but we’re kinda like villains, aren’t we?”

“...Fair enough.”

“Balse!”

“Miss Ariel, wouldn’t that incantation destroy this ship and send us flying into space?”

“I mean, it *is* a spaceship.”

“...Fair enough.”

As we soar through the sky, I enjoy a pointless little exchange with Wrath, referencing a certain flying castle.

I was able to make the spaceship move without any issues.

And now, we’re heading for the Great Elroe Labyrinth, harassing the Word of God religion by destroying churches as we pass over towns along the way.

When the battle between White and Gülie began, and “world quest sequence 2” was announced, our path forward became clear.

Sequence 2 added a World Quest option to the Taboo menu.

By reading it, people can find out what this battle is about and what the conditions are for either side to win.

First of all, there’s the outcome of the fight between White and Gülie.

Honestly, the winner of this fight is almost certain to determine the winning side.

White is the only person who can initiate the destruction of the system. If she’s alive and well, we win, and if she loses, we can’t destroy the system anymore.

We have no way to affect the outcome of this battle...at least, we didn't at first.

But "sequence 2" changed all that.

By introducing the ability to meddle in the battle via prayer, "sequence 2" made it so that this battle between two people now involves the entire world.

Whichever god you pray for will get stronger.

I imagine the change won't amount to much—at least from a single person's prayer.

But if you accumulate small boosts in power from many prayers, it can build into something big.

That power might very well determine the victor.

Now the masses have been given the right to change the outcome of a war in the heavens that would normally be far beyond their influence.

"So they're telling the people of this world to choose their own fate, instead of leaving it to outsiders. A clever move, though I hate to admit it."

Sophia looks grudgingly impressed as she grumbles.

With these rules, even humans who have no power to fight can meddle in the battle between White and Gülie.

It's giving a fair chance to every single person.

Typical of D to force people to make an impossible choice.

It's especially like her in that people who make that choice are allowed to be free of Taboo.

That's right: If you pray to one of the gods, you can erase Taboo.

The "atone" command that Taboo causes to echo in one's mind is more than enough pressure to push people to the brink.

Some of us are used to it, like Dustin and I, but it could easily give a normal human a nervous breakdown.

So if they can be rid of Taboo and its accompanying curse, of course they're

going to pray.

If they refuse to choose either, then they'll continue to be plagued by Taboo until their dying day.

It would take considerable grit to commit to that choice.

Will they choose between two painful options, or stay neutral and put up with keeping Taboo?

Either way, they're in hell.

Truly, I'd expect no less from D.

But painful though it might be, I imagine most of mankind will go for the same choice.

Everyone puts themselves first when it comes down to it, after all.

If you're forced to weigh between your own life and your savior's...well, you know.

"Honestly. I can't believe this..."

I want to believe that White will win anyway.

But truthfully, it's hard to be optimistic.

"Still, all we can do is whatever we're able to do right now."

That's the other option for victory.

For the other side, that is.

If someone with ruler privileges enters the system core in the Great Elroe Labyrinth, they can initiate an emergency shutdown that stops the system from being destroyed.

We have to make sure that doesn't happen.

That's why we're zooming toward the labyrinth in this spaceship right now.

We're going to get there ahead of Dustin and his people, and prepare to fend them off.

If we fail to defend the core room, we've lost this war.

Our only path to victory is for White to win *and* for us to successfully defend the system core.

Whereas they only need Gülie to win *or* someone to break through our defenses and shut down the system's destruction.

We have to pull off both conditions, while they only need one to win.

Since White is fighting so hard, we've got to hold up our end by defending the core no matter what.

I'm dead set on this.

<World quest sequence 3. Each side's representative shall give a speech. Demon Lord Ariel.>

"Huh?!"

So when the Word of God suddenly rings out, I let out a startled yelp.

It's even more surprising, since I was mentioned by name.

And then, my own weird yelp echoes in my head.

"Huh? What's going on?"

My confused mutter also echoes in my head.

"I can hear your voice in my head, Miss Ariel."

"What? So it's not just me who's hearing this?"

"Right."

Wrath nods.

I look at Sophia, and she nods, too.

Uh-oh. I have a veeeery bad feeling about this.

"Huh? I'm not, like, broadcasting live to all mankind or something, am I?"

Thus far, the world quest sequences have affected all living humanoids.

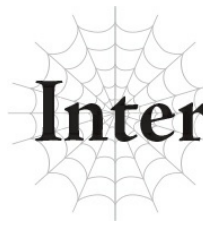
That doesn't mean...that they're hearing all of this right now, too...does it?

They heard everything, including that weird yelp?!

"Nn...gaaaaaah!"

When that possibility occurs to me, I accidentally let out an even more embarrassing whine.

Even knowing that everyone in the world might have heard that whine, too...



Interlude

SPEECHES FROM EACH SIDE

“Uhh... okay! Got off on the wrong foot there, but try to forget you heard that part. Please.”

“Well, then. So what’s the idea again? A speech?”

“A speech. A speech, huh...”

“Okay, but honestly, I don’t really have anything to say.”

“I mean, I’m not exactly expecting much out of humanity.”

“Can you blame me? Why would I hold out any hope for people who lived such carefree lives until we got into this situation?”

“Lady Sariel put her life on the line to keep this world going, but humans forgot about that generosity until right this very moment.”

“How many years do you think it’s been since then? You should get some idea if you look at the logs in the Taboo menu.”

“Although I guess it didn’t help that a certain someone has deliberately erased that history to make sure everyone forgets.”

“But still, since I’ve been watching all this time, I’ve gone past anger and gone straight to disappointment.”

“It kills me to think that Lady Sariel sacrificed herself to save such idiots.”

“All those years ago, mankind made a choice to sacrifice her to save themselves. So it’s pretty obvious that you’re going to choose the same thing this time, too.”

“So I’m not expecting anything good, and I can’t be bothered to try and convince you.”

“But I will say this much.”

“We’re the ones who will win in the end.”

“If no one—not even Lady Sariel herself, in fact—is going to try to save her,

then I'll save her myself."

"Even if I have to sacrifice more than half of humanity to do it."

"If you people are planning to sacrifice Lady Sariel again, you better be prepared to be sacrificed yourselves, right?"

"So I'll say this loud and clear."

"I am Ariel, the Second Demon Lord."

"Leader of the demons, and a true Demon Lord, not like the fakes who've been appointed by the system."

"In order to free Lady Sariel, I will carry out the dying wish of the First Demon Lord Foduey, who aimed to erase humanity. I am declaring war on all of you."

"Humans, please die for the sake of your goddess."

<Pontiff of the Word of God, Dustin.>

My name is called.

When Ariel was called upon first, I suspected this might happen.

There is no human better suited to represent our faction than yours truly.

Thus, it was inevitable that I would be called next.

From the moment I predicted this outcome, I began preparing a speech in my mind.

But all of that was wiped clean from my mind by Lady Ariel's speech.

She made no effort to collect votes, nor to curry favor. She simply declared that she and her comrades would win through their own strength alone.

Then she even declared war on all of humanity and told them to die for the goddess.

Her confidence is, quite frankly, resplendent.

"....."

I am sure my voice is already being broadcast to all of humanity now.

But I can no longer open my mouth.

For a few minutes, I remain silent.

“...We have been through many long years of hardship.”

When I finally manage to force the words out, my voice sounds terribly faint.

“There is so much...that we have built up in that time...”

I remember when I worked alongside my comrades to overcome the period of chaos after the system was first put into place.

When the first Demon Lord, Foduey, bared his fangs at us, and humanity was genuinely in danger of extinction.

When I fought alongside the first hero, and we prevailed over that danger together.

When my first life ended, and during my second life, I saw the times begin to change with my own eyes.

When I felt the loneliness of being left behind as a new generation took over, and fewer and fewer people knew of the world before the system.

When I created the organization called the Word of God, in order to give the masses something to turn to in their time of despair.

In each of these times, I always did what I truly thought was best.

But when I look back, I feel enormous regret, wondering if I could have made things better.

I’ve been reminded countless times that I am only one mere human.

Over and over again.

Try as I might to do what is best, I perpetually fall short.

But I keep moving forward, step by step.

I have built up so much.

Good deeds, evil deeds, and everything in between.

It was all for the sake of saving humanity.

“I believe in what I have built up all this time. And so...there is no need to say too much.”

Surely I could have given a better speech.

After the speech Lady Ariel gave, it would have been child's play to use her words to turn more people's hearts and minds toward my aims.

And yet I could not bring myself to say such things.

"I am Dustin, the last president of Daztrudia, and the first pontiff of the Word of God religion. All this time, I have shamelessly repaid our debt of gratitude toward Lady Sarel the Goddess with only hateful deeds and words."

The rational part of my brain warns me that if I say such things, people will turn against me.

And yet in this final hour, I wished to express my true feelings without ostentation.

It has been so painful all this time.

I felt that my name should live in infamy for eternity.

...Yes, it is true.

I myself despised my own actions.

"And yet I made my choice. That I would save humanity, even if it meant returning a favor with spite. Which is precisely why I have a responsibility to see my role through to the very end."

Since I made my choice, I must see it through, even if I hate myself for it.

"I will save humanity. No matter what it takes. And so..."

I take a deep breath.

These last words are heavy indeed.

"Gods, please die for the sake of humanity."

An opposite declaration to Lady Ariel's speech.

Surely there was a better speech I could have given.

But this is what I chose.

Now that I have said it, I cannot take it back.

Nor would I.

I will save humanity, all of mankind, even if I must sacrifice gods to do it.

<This concludes the speeches from each side.>

As soon as I finish talking, the Word of God echoes once again.

Like always, it is Lady Sariel's voice, which I've become so familiar with.

<Now, then...>

But the next words are in a voice I've never heard before.

<Thus the stage is set. People of this world, the time has come. Make your choice. Take your actions. This is the final world quest sequence. Will the evil god accomplish its goals or not?>

Unlike Lady Sariel's announcements, which are always mechanical and devoid of emotion, this one is bone-chillingly cold.

The words of this unknown speaker could give one goosebumps.

I can only think of one theory.

The god who Lord Black Dragon asked for help, who created the system for us.

<Well then, do your best to entertain me.>

The god's words signal the beginning of the end.

The start of the battle to determine the fate of this world.



Epilogue & Prologue

The speeches from both the Demon Lord and the pontiff reached me, too.

“We’re the ones who will win in the end,” she says?

Well, I can’t go and lose after hearing a line like that, now can I?

“Neither of us can lose, it would seem.”

Facing off against me, Black gives a grim smile.

I guess he must have heard the speeches, too.

To me, the pontiff’s speech kinda sounded like a cry of sorrow.

Listening to it, I could tell that he really suffered a lot, but couldn’t choose any other path, all this time.

It’s clear from his speech that he’s not a bad guy—he’s actually really noble.

If things played out differently, maybe we could’ve even stood side by side as allies instead of enemies.

The same goes for Black here.

It’s not like we hate each other.

Honestly, I kinda like the guy.

But we still have to fight.

Because neither of us can back down from what we believe in.

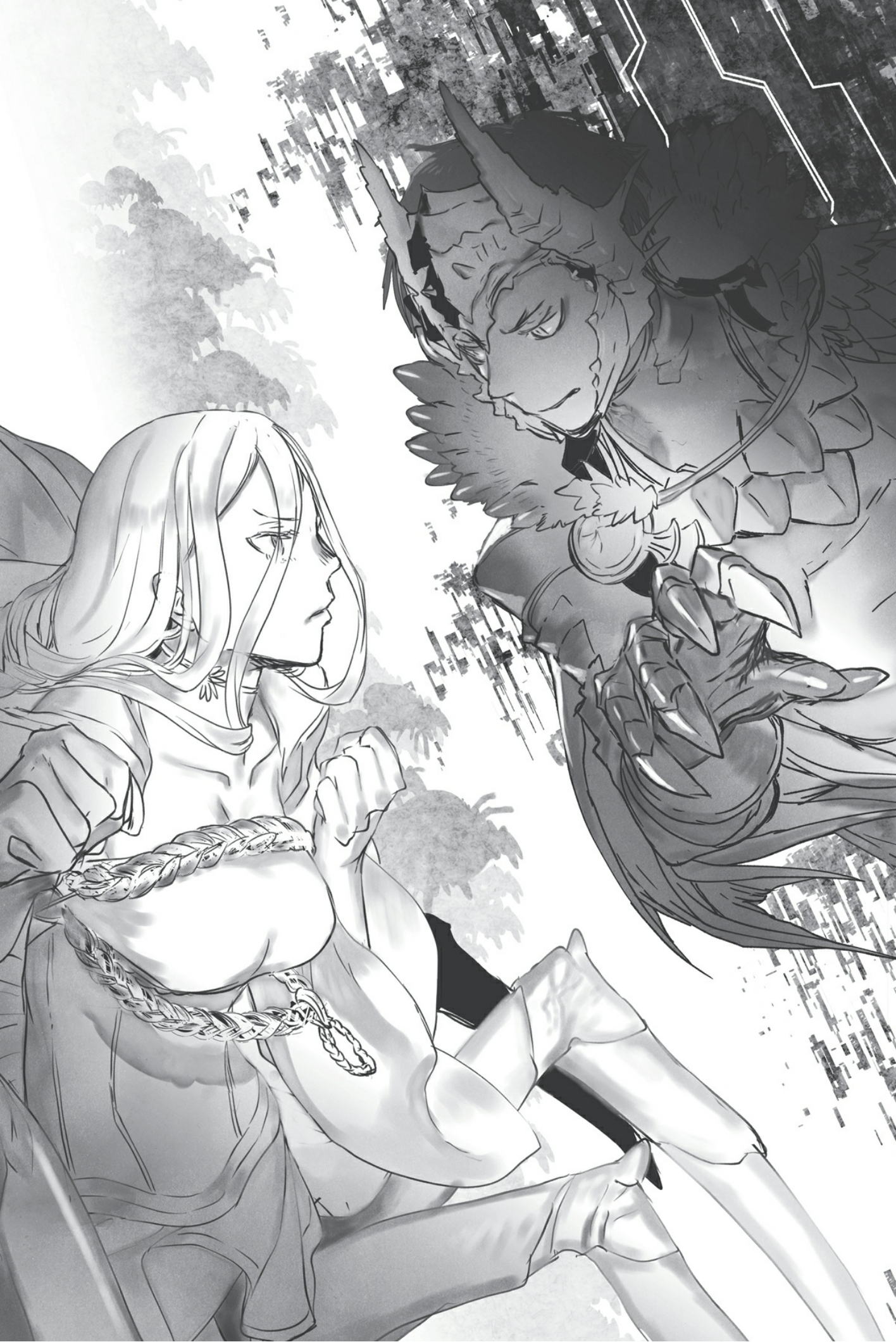
All that’s left, then, is to give it everything we’ve got.

So I make this declaration as a sign of respect.

“We’re the ones who are gonna win.”

“I cannot afford to lose, either.”

We both have goals we can’t give up on.



We both have ideals and people we want to protect.

We're both putting our pride on the line.

My opponent is Administrator Güliedistodiez.

The dragon god who has watched over this world all along, forbidden from doing anything more.

A guardian who carries the hopes of humanity on his back.

I couldn't ask for a more worthy foe.

But still, we're the ones who will win in the end.

Even if he carries the faith and strength of all mankind, I will tear it all down.

"I'm ready."

"Let's go."

And thus resumed the battle between Güliedistodiez and me.

AFTERWORD

Hello. I'm Okina Baba.

Another year is nearly over.

And this series is nearly over, too!

Believe it or not, Volume 16, the next and final volume of the series, will (hopefully) be coming out at the beginning of the year!

In other words, two back-to-back volumes in two months.

Two back-to-back volumes in two months!

It's important, so I said it back-to-back, too.

Why did I attempt something as stupid as publishing volumes two months in a row?

Well, it all started with something that was said at my meeting with the editor after I finished writing Volume 14.

"I think Volume 15 is going to be the preparation for the final battle, and Volume 16 will be the last volume, but I feel like Volume 15 won't be exciting enough in that case."

Yes, that's right.

As you have probably already realized, having presumably finished reading Volume 15 just now, there were basically no actual battles in this volume.

Although there's almost a battle in a bed.

I suppose that technically the battle between Black and White started, but that won't really get serious until Volume 16...

It's all necessary for the story, but that leaves Volume 15 here as only a buildup to Volume 16.

Volume 14 came out in January, almost a year ago. Will the readers really be happy if they waited a whole year for a setup volume?

That's what I was worried about.

"What if Volume 16 were to come out at the same time, or just a month later?"

Yeah, I said it.

I blurted it out, just like that!

"Let's go with two months in a row, then."

And my editor Ms. W fought valiantly to make it happen just like that.

Ha-ha-ha!

What followed were endless days of writing in order to put out volumes two months in a row!

How many times?! How many times did I regret saying something so stupid?!

Even before that, I've regretted saying, "Yeah, sure, I can make that work!" time and time again, but apparently, I never learn.

How many times must I tie the noose around my own neck before I learn my lesson?

And so your old friend Okina is here to tell you all not to go around saying stupid things to other people without thinking it through. The end.

Ah, it's not over yet?

Right.

So yes, I certainly did suffer in the process, but at least it means I'm able to bring Volume 15 and Volume 16 to you with hardly any time in between.

Please look forward to the final volume, too.

Now, if I may give some thank-yous.

To Tsukasa Kiryuu-sensei, my illustrator.

Since I decided to suffer, that means Kiryuu-sensei got stuck with a brutal schedule, too!

I'm really sorry...and thank you so much!

Thanks to Asahiro Kakashi-sensei, the artist of the manga adaptation, and to Gratinbird-sensei, the artist of the spinoff manga.

I'm sorry I've been late on confirming the thumbnails and such because I'm so busy this year...and thank you so much!

To everyone who was involved in the making of the anime.

It's thanks to the hard work of director Shin Itagaki and countless other people that both cours of the anime aired successfully.

I want to use this space to express my heartfelt gratitude to everyone who helped with the anime. Thank you all so much!

To my editor, Ms. W. Listen, I know I caused a lot of trouble for you with the schedule and stuff, by suddenly saying that we should put out two volumes in a row, and all that... I'm really sorry! And thank you so much!

Half of these thank-yous were mixed with apologies, but I can at least offer my pure thanks to everyone who picked up this book, and to everyone who watched the anime.

Thank you so much!



So I'm a Spider, So What?

Art:
Asahiro Kakashi

Original Story:
Okina Baba

Character Design:
Tsukasa Kiryu

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THE Eminence IN Shadow

ONE BIG FAT LIE

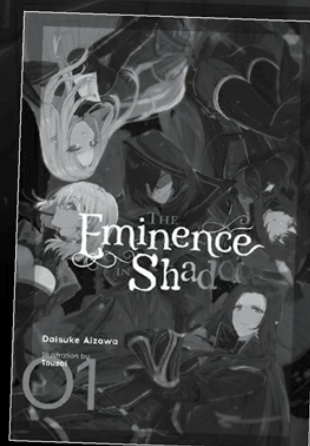
AND A FEW TWISTED TRUTHS

Even in his past life, Cid's dream wasn't to become a protagonist or a final boss. He'd rather lie low as a minor character until it's prime time to reveal he's a mastermind...or at least, do the next best thing—pretend to be one! And now that he's been reborn into another world, he's ready to set the perfect conditions to live out his dreams to the fullest. Cid jokingly recruits members to his organization and makes up a whole backstory about an evil cult that they need to take down. Well, as luck would have it, these imaginary adversaries turn out to be the real deal—and everyone knows the truth but him!



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MANGA

LIGHT NOVEL



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